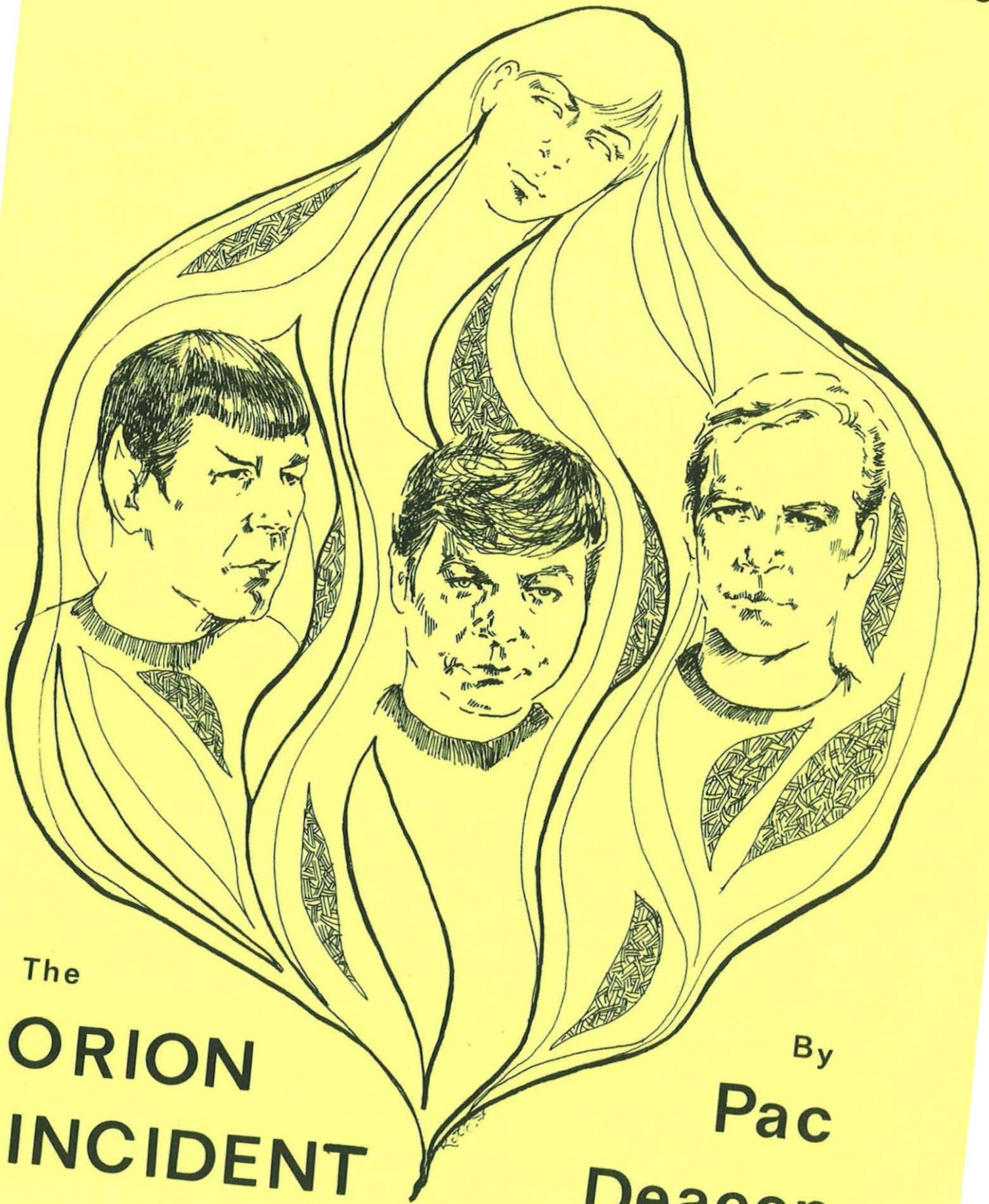


A STAR TREK
FANZINE

SCOTTPRESS



The
**ORION
INCIDENT**

By
**Pac
Deacon**

THE ORION INCIDENT

(or SCENES OF FAMILY LIFE)

by

PAC DEACON

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ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona

THE ORION INCIDENT

(or SCENES OF FAMILY LIFE)

by

PAC DEACON

This story is respectfully and affectionately dedicated to DeForest Kelley, who finds the special magic of STAR TREK lies in the way its people came together and made a family. Also to that "nonentity" Chekov, without whom some of the events related here would have happened rather differently...

* * * * *

"Your move, Spock."

Kirk was really not quite sure that his friend was still with him. For the life of him he could not stop himself any longer from shifting about restlessly in his chair. The Vulcan did not usually take such a time to make up his mind what to do. If his opponent had been anyone else but his brilliantly logical and of course totally emotionless First Officer, Kirk could have sworn that he was lost in an ecstasy of aesthetic contemplation of the chess pieces before his eyes. There they sat in all their carved beauty on their little transparent platforms; it was twenty minutes at least since Spock had touched any of them.

"Yes, Captain." His friend gave a small sigh and moved a piece. How short the Human attention span was, even in the best of them!

Kirk pounced. "Check."

Spock immediately moved another piece. Kirk paused, momentarily baffled. That was not quite what he had been expecting. Then he suddenly saw his chance and went for it.

"Checkmate." And it was. He could not restrain a jubilant grin.

As Spock lifted his hand to tip over his king in acknowledgement, Kirk's door-bell chimed. Because it was not the standard equipment buzzer he knew it was a friendly call, for only a privileged few knew how to work the chime. It was a new toy, presented to him largely as a joke by Uhura after their last shore leave, and had been fitted by Scott in conditions of total secrecy. They had wanted to surprise him, and by Gemini, they had succeeded!

"Come in!"

It was McCoy, carrying two bottles, a glass rod and three stacking glasses. Out of the corner of his eye Kirk saw a tiny

muscle twitch in Spock's jaw. It was the nearest the Vulcan ever got to flinching outright. He said hastily,

"You're always welcome, Bones, with or without a bottle."

"Indeed," Spock murmured - "preferably without."

McCoy ignored this, having taken in at a glance what had just occurred. He put down his paraphernalia and strolled innocently over to the chess game.

"What's this, Spock? Jim beaten you at your own game, has he? Astonishing! I bet you refused to believe it till the very last moment!"

"As a matter of fact, Doctor, you are wrong. I had known for some time that I was defeated, provided the Captain played the logical moves."

"Then why did you keep me on tenterhooks so long, Spock, before conceding?" said Kirk, rising to his feet and stretching luxuriously.

"I was hesitating, Captain, as to how to proceed. If I did something quite unpredictable you might not have fathomed my intention until it was too late for you to make a successful countermove."

"So you admit to copying Jim's illogical methods of play in order to win, do you, Spock?"

"I said I was *considering* the effect it might have: only considering it, Doctor. As you see, he has won anyway."

"You let me win, you mean, Spock!"

"Captain, I would never insult you by *letting* you win. I was simply forced to the conclusion that further resistance would not alter the final outcome."

"I think I've heard everything now, Jim. A Vulcan has admitted to failing to poker-bluff his opponent - at chess!"

Spock rose stiffly and moved to the door leading to his quarters. "If you will excuse me, Captain, I still have some reports to go through. I will not intrude on you gentlemen further."

The door slid open and he stalked through. They caught a glimpse of the flickering red twilight beyond before it closed again behind him. Kirk turned to McCoy reproachfully.

"I think you went too far, Bones. You've really hurt his feelings."

"His *what*?" exploded McCoy. "If ever there was a case of someone having his cake and eating it - why do you let him get away with it, Jim?"

"You know why, Bones..." Here Kirk interrupted himself. He cocked an ear in the direction of Spock's closed door. They both tiptoed nearer and listened. Strange sounds were coming from the other side. The two looked at one another. It was a peculiarly Vulcan noise, which each recognised with a slight sinking of the heart. Spock was tuning his harp with unaccustomed vigour.

Or - was he already launched on a piece? It was practically impossible, unless you were Uhura, to tell the difference...

McCoy looked at Kirk with a guilty, rather miserable expression.

"Do you realise, Jim - he told us a *fib*? Unless he can play with one hand and go through reports with the other. We've actually begun to corrupt a truthful Vulcan!"

"Don't exaggerate, Bones: it was only a little white lie. And anyone has the right to change his mind, hasn't he?"

"No, Jim, he just said that to get away from me. I feel about the size of a pin head!" And before Kirk could utter a warning or put out a hand to stop him, he banged on Spock's door impetuously, calling out,

"Spock! Spock! Let me in! I want to talk to you!"

The twanging of the harp stopped. A cool voice said, "Enter."

The door slid open suddenly and McCoy was nearly pitched into the fire-lit room. Kirk, close behind him, saved him from losing his balance completely.

"Spock! You didn't have to lie to us! Was I so obnoxious that you would go to those lengths to be rid of me? Now promise you'll not do it again!" he finished illogically, looking pleadingly at the Vulcan.

"Doctor, Doctor - calm yourself! Sit down here a moment." Kirk indicated a chair next to a table bearing neat stacks of files. One lay open in the middle, its pages covered with hand-written annotations.

"As you see, Doctor," continued Spock, "I actually can play with one hand and go through reports with the other." He demonstrated it for their benefit. "We are neither of us guilty in this instance." He threw Kirk a strange look. The Captain held on to his gravity with great difficulty. McCoy stared at Spock in horror.

"You heard every word I said!"

"My hearing is exceptionally keen, Doctor, as you confirm every time you put me through a medical. And emotional Humans seem incapable of moderating their voices."

"So you're playing games with me, you pointy-eared elf! Well, I think you'd better do something to make up for it. Why don't you play something for us - er, Terran music preferably - instead of being so secretive about it? I'd rather be an audience in the same room than forced to eavesdrop from next door."

"The guilt feelings to which Humans are so prone are only one degree less fascinatingly illogical than their extraordinary craving for punishment, Doctor. I sometimes think I shall never understand their true wishes."

"You certainly don't seem to recognise a genuine desire on our part to extend our field of experience, Spock." Here Kirk groaned inwardly. If only Bones could be induced just to speak for himself! "Well, I'm going to tell you a true story in the hope that it may convince you to take me seriously."

"I thought you were a physician, not a story-teller, Doctor."

"Sometimes, my friend, they amount to the same thing." As if suddenly tired, McCoy dropped to a cross-legged position on the deep red carpet. The flame in the Vulcan fire-pot flickered behind him and cast dancing shadows on the wall. Spock thought he caught a fleeting look of sadness in the Doctor's eyes. Then he wondered if he had imagined it; was he becoming infected with Human habits of mind without realising it? He shook his head slightly as if to make sure its contents were still functioning as they should. Kirk, who had been quietly observing both of them, and understood it all, thought it best not to try to explain.

McCoy embarked on his tale. He liked a captive audience.

"There was this European explorer, Spock, stranded somewhere in the middle of China because of an unexpected rebellion. He wanted to reach the sea to find a ship, which would take him to safety, but it was over six hundred miles away. However, he found a Chinese guide who promised to get him safely to the coast. To avoid capture they would have to do the whole journey on foot, travelling by night, and lying hidden during the day. The Chinaman was quite illiterate, but he had a flute, and he played it interminably - all night when they were plodding along between one village and the next, and in the daytime after they'd had their sleep and were waiting for darkness. Have you ever listened to Chinese music?" he asked abruptly.

Kirk and Spock both shook their heads, bemused.

"Well," pursued McCoy relentlessly, "it's so foreign to Western ears that it seems to mean nothing at all and sounds pretty excruciating too, from all accounts. For the first few weeks the explorer thought he would go insane; but he didn't dare offend his guide because he couldn't do without him, so he had no choice but to endure it as best he could. After a time he noticed an odd thing: he was starting to recognise certain musical phrases when they were repeated, and then he found himself beginning to expect them at the right time. His ears were getting quite used to the strange sounds. After a few more weeks he was even enjoying some of it. It took them nearly four months to reach the sea, by which time he had actually become an addict! Yet if anyone had told him at the outset that he was going to miss that Chinaman he would have laughed in their faces."

"Is that story really true, Bones?" asked Kirk in a sceptical tone.

"As true as I sit here, Jim. I came across it in an old medical review, early twentieth century actually, when I was doing some research into the psychology of hearing. It was an authentic account of a real journey. So you see, Spock, there's hope for everybody! Why don't you give me and the Captain here more opportunities to broaden our minds?"

Spock did not answer, but picked up the harp. He softly played eight notes, which made a complete statement, with rather unusual intervals, and a surprising resolution. It was cool, tranquil, almost unearthly, perfectly balanced, eminently satisfying. It was an exact reproduction of Kirk's door chime. After a slight pause, meditatively, Spock played it again.

McCoy got to his feet. "Don't overdo it, Spock - Jim's going to get tired of that chime all too soon as it is."

"I wonder," returned Spock quietly. "Perhaps not."

With a swift movement of his right hand he produced from his instrument the most alien chord they had ever heard, making McCoy give an involuntary shudder. As its harmonics washed over them, Kirk heard an even more alien, and annoying, sound - the buzzer of his cabin intercom.

"Excuse me, gentlemen." He went briskly to answer it.

Uhura's voice was speaking. "Captain Kirk. Captain Kirk - please respond."

"Kirk here. Go ahead, Lieutenant."

"Mayday message just received, sir: a small space dinghy requesting immediate aid. One occupant, female, injured; food and water exhausted, oxygen supply dwindling; vessel off course and lost - drifting out of control due to battle damage."

"I'll be right there, Lieutenant. Spock, Bones - I'll need both of you on the Bridge right away."

"Why are the moments for self-improvement so short in this life?" complained McCoy, directing a tragi-comical gaze at the ceiling of the turbolift as they ascended together.

"Does not every day bring you a kaleidoscope of opportunities, Doctor?" Spock asked, without a trace of irony in his voice.

"*'Join Starfleet and no two of your days will be alike'*," quoted Kirk with a grin, remembering the recruiting slogans of his youth. He stepped out onto the Bridge and walked over to the Command chair, which Sulu vacated with alacrity.

"Screen on visual, Lieutenant."

"Aye, aye, sir."

A small craft appeared, apparently motionless, off their port bow. There had been identification letters on her side but these were now almost invisible against their background of flame-scorched metal. The hull, dented and warped in several places, had clearly taken a battering at the hands of a determined enemy.

"Open a channel to the craft, Lieutenant. Then tell Transporter Room to get a tractor beam operational."

"Channel open, sir."

"Disabled spacecraft, this is Enterprise. Are you receiving me?"

A faint voice replied. "With difficulty. Go ahead, Enterprise."

"We shall have a tractor beam on you directly. It will bring you out of danger into our hangar deck. Do you copy?"

"Affirmative. Please hurry." The speaker seemed to be gasping for breath.

"Uhura - tell hangar deck personnel to get external doors closed

and repressurisation started the instant retrieval is complete. Mr. Spock, you have the con. Dr. McCoy, come with me."

As the lift took them down, McCoy contacted Sickbay.

"McCoy here, Christine. I want a stretcher, oxygen, a nurse and two orderlies to the hangar deck as quick as you can. Emergency standby, please. Out."

"I just hope we're not too late, Bones," said Kirk, rather anxiously. "Sounded to me as though that dinghy's oxygen was running out fast."

They hurried along the corridor to the hangar deck doors, which to their mild surprise were already standing open to let them through.

"Good work, gentlemen," said Kirk to the deck crew. "My commendation for speed. Now get the door off that craft as fast as you can. The occupant may be at her last gasp."

The scream of tortured metal, followed by a loud clang, answered him. The damaged door of the dinghy lay on the hangar deck floor. McCoy scrambled inside ahead of the nearest crewman and took a quick look.

"Stretcher!" he snapped, reappearing in the jagged opening. "One of you orderlies come in here with me and help get her out. Nurse, set up the oxygen equipment - fast!"

As the inert form of their surprise guest was carried past him, cocooned in a foil blanket, Kirk saw practically nothing of her at all except a mop of pale green hair trailing over the edge of the stretcher. The shock of the new! As ever, it set his nerves tingling. *'Join Starfleet and beat boredom'* he thought to himself fondly as he took the nearest lift back to the bridge, indulging in pleasant speculation about the interesting information he would get when the alien should be well enough to answer questions. Meanwhile McCoy and his contingent had arrived in Sickbay, where Nurse Chapel had a bed waiting, with a permanent oxygen dispenser set up beside it. Other equipment would await the results of McCoy's preliminary examination.

"Well, at least she's humanoid, Doctor," Chapel remarked as they finished settling the patient in bed and McCoy began to pass his scanners over the girl's still unconscious form. "That shouldn't be too much of a challenge to our resources. Quite pretty, too."

"Appearances can be deceptive, Christine," retorted McCoy, who, in spite of his habitual grumbling, actually preferred challenges. He bit back a further caustic remark about the internal arrangements of Vulcans, remembering just in time that jokes at Spock's expense did not go down too well with his female colleague. However, his examination revealing no significant differences from the Human anatomy, he was able to turn his attention without further ado to treating the outward and visible injuries of his patient.

There was a bad burn across one shoulder, caused no doubt when she had fallen against the hot metallic wall of the dinghy and lain there unconscious until McCoy moved her. Her left arm was broken, too - he had noticed that apparently she had not had time to strap herself into the pilot's seat before making her getaway. *But how, he wondered, had she got that deep gash on the thigh?* It had bled



all over the place but fortunately the main blood vessels were intact - *Otherwise*, thought McCoy, *she would hardly have made it alive*. Looking down at her as he worked, and admiring the small neat nose, the very determined chin, the fine but decisively-marked eyebrows, he had the sudden conviction, uncomfortable because it was so inexplicable, that he had seen her face before. But that was obviously impossible - yet she reminded him of someone, someone to whom he tried in vain to put a name. As he frowned down at her, trying to remember, her eyes opened and he got the shock of his life. They were like opals - no one colour, but an extraordinary shifting mix of green and pink and grey and blue; combined with the incredible hair the effect was stunning. McCoy took a second to recover from his surprise. Then he smiled down at her professionally, and said,

"Well, young lady, you're safe now on board the Enterprise. I'm Leonard McCoy, the ship's doctor. I've just set your broken arm and tidied you up generally. If you follow orders and keep as quiet and still as possible, you should be up and about again in two or three days. This is Nurse Chapel who'll be keeping a motherly eye on you. We'll save the questions for later - all you have to do now is sleep and get well."

He smiled at her again encouragingly. The opal-coloured eyes brightened a little. *Who in the whole Universe*, thought Chapel, *could resist one of Leonard's smiles?* Sure enough, he got a tiny smile in return. As the alien girl's lips parted, a gap was revealed in the top row of white teeth. McCoy's heart turned over. Again that nagging sense of familiarity had him in its grip. With a great effort he fought it back and looked across at Chapel.

"The poor kid really has been in the wars, hasn't she! A spot of dentistry is indicated for later, I think. Don't worry, we'll give you a new tooth and no-one will know the difference. I've given you something to take away the pain of the burn, so just you go to sleep now, d'ye hear?" He spoke as if soothing a small child. "Right, Nurse - for now she's all yours. Take good care of her."

In his own quarters McCoy kept a few precious works of reference, computer tapes on xenobiology going back to his student days - or rather, his *early* student days: in this business, he reflected, you never stopped being a student; the inexhaustible variety of Nature saw to that. He had always found it to be his profession's main attraction, and its chief glory, and he would not have had things any other way. Before going to his tape cabinet he sat down at his desk, unlocked a drawer near the bottom, and took out an even older treasure - his own private and extremely primitive cross-reference index, written out in ink, on real, somewhat yellowing, cards, which were strung on real, old-fashioned, faded pink cotton tape. It gave him enormous pleasure to flip through them with his fingers just as his grandfather and great-grandfather had done before him, for it was a genuine family antique which each generation had added to and cherished. He also enjoyed the sense of secrecy which consulting it gave him; Jim would understand, but if Spock ever caught him using it, thought McCoy, his life would not be worth living, for he would never have a leg to stand on again in any of their scientific arguments. The Vulcan's cutting remark about 'trial and error' still rankled whenever he happened to remember it.

"Hair... H," he muttered. "Hair - let's see - blue, carrot, curly, dark etc, etc, golden... ah, here we are: green, pale..."

plenty of entries under green hair... Damn! No combination with humanoid characteristics listed. So - I'm going to have to start from scratch. Well, that should be interesting anyway: just as well the young woman's basic metabolism seems to be O.K. Gives me time to find out how she functions before anything serious crops up."

He rose to his feet and picked up the card index, giving his habitual glance at the photo-cube on his desk as he did so. From it, the face of his daughter Joanna laughed back at him; she was on a sunny beach and her wet hair hung down on to her shoulders - she had obviously just been for a swim. He froze in his tracks as he stared at the picture. So that was it! Now he knew why the alien girl looked familiar. He hadn't seen Joanna for so long...

Then he shook himself impatiently. It was all foolish imagination - not really a resemblance. He'd be having hallucinations next. He bent down, put the index back in its drawer and locked it, and walked out of the room. Kirk would want to know the results of his work so far - he'd better report to the Bridge right away. A sight of Kirk, and Spock - especially Spock! - would clear his head of this nostalgic nonsense.

* * * * *

CHAPTER TWO

"So, gentlemen," Kirk said, "this is the situation. We have thirty Earth days before we are due to begin our exploratory mission on Gamma Citari, which Ensign Chekov assures me we can reach at Warp Three in half that time. The Orion pirates who destroyed the Xorentis carrying Marinta and her parents and their companions to Alconis 5 must have been operating from a base not too far away from her home world, Xoria. We have an excellent opportunity to investigate them, catch up with them, and put a stop to their activities. Does anyone have any practical objections?"

"Will the Orion government accept our right to interfere with its subjects, even if they are pirates?" asked McCoy.

"It cannot legally object, Doctor," said Spock, "to our protecting dependants of the Federation against armed attack by its nationals, especially those engaged in criminal activities on their own account."

"But how can we investigate people when we've never seen them and haven't a clue as to their whereabouts?" objected Scott.

"Ah, but we do have one clue," replied Kirk. "A tenuous one, it's true, but it gives us a starting point. The last thing Marinta heard, before her father sealed her into the space dinghy, was a snatch of conversation between two of the pirates. They mentioned a planet called Talasson. She thinks it was to be their next port of call."

"Talasson," said Sulu thoughtfully. "I've never heard of it. Does anyone know where it is exactly? How far away?"

All eyes turned to Spock.

"Talasson is the only satellite of a yellow star, G59, eighty hours distant at Warp Three from our present position. Sixty percent of its surface area is ocean; there is a single but quite extensive habitable land mass, very mountainous, as well as polar ice caps. It

has some animal life but no native intelligent species as yet. These characteristics would certainly make it a potentially attractive haven and/or base for marauders."

Sulu's eyes had begun to sparkle. "Mountains and water and no people! We could have it all to ourselves! Sounds great! I vote we go there, Captain, and show these pirates what's what!"

"Vote, Mr. Sulu?" said his Captain in tones of exaggerated disapproval. "Vote? Since when has the Enterprise been a democracy? You are not here to *vote*, but to discuss possibilities, and advise your commanding officer." He paused to observe his effect. The sudden hush was certainly impressive.

Poor Sulu had gone a dull copper colour. "Oh, God!" he said. "A thousand abject apologies, Captain! Mr. Spock was making the place sound so attractive that I completely forgot myself."

Spock's eyebrows rose alarmingly at this unsolicited tribute to his powers of description. Uhura gave a quickly repressed giggle.

"You also forget that there is no guarantee we shall find the pirates there," said Kirk with mock severity. "I suspect your thoughts were less on catching them than on the possibilities for shore leave afterwards. But cheer up, Sulu - "I vote we go there too; after all, we have to start somewhere. And if by good fortune we can get our little cleaning-up operation completed fairly quickly, who knows? Some fresh air and sea bathing might do us all good before we have to face the geological delights of Gamma Citari."

"Start up a dilithium mine there, I suppose you mean, Captain," said McCoy plaintively. "My back is aching in anticipation already."

"What do you intend doing with yon wee lassie?" asked Scott. "None of our missions is going to take us in the direction of Alconis 5."

I've arranged to pass close enough to Starbase 6 on our way to Citari, Mr. Scott, for a small transport to come out and take her off. A Federation ship can then take her to her original destination, or back to Xoria should she so prefer."

He paused. No one seemed to have anything else to say.

"Thank you, gentlemen, Lieutenant. That is all."

"I must say you deserve congratulations, Bones," said Kirk as the turbolift took the three officers back to the Bridge level. "You've done an excellent job on Marinta's injuries, and she seems to me in remarkably good spirits, considering everything."

"That's what worries me, Jim. She's had a stream of visitors, crew members wanting to make friends and keep her from feeling lonely: but you realise she had a terrible experience back there on that ship. The trauma hasn't revealed itself yet but I'm convinced it will; I just don't know when or how."

"It was she who asked me if she could beam down to Talasson with us, Bones. I said she could, provided you agreed. What do you think? If it turns out to be as idyllic as Mr. Sulu and Mr. Spock here seem to imagine - "

"But Jim, that's crazy! What about the pirates? A confrontation with the fiends who murdered her parents might do untold mental damage. No, it'd be out of the question."

"But Bones, she told me she wants the chance to confront them. She's a very brave young woman. She is the only person left who can identify them and she knows that her testimony would be the essential part of my report to Starfleet and subsequently of the prosecution's evidence at their trial. Are you sure you're not letting yourself be overly concerned about her? She'll be well protected, I promise you, the whole time we're down on that planet, or at least as long as will be necessary."

"I understand your reasons, Jim, but I don't like it. Delayed emotional shock is bad enough without creating additional strains. Do you know what those pirates did to her parents? After stripping the passengers and crew of their personal possessions they threw them out of the airlock, one at a time, *alive*. Marinta's father was the last to go. He had to watch all the others die in that gruesome fashion first, including his own wife. And the child saw it all through the ports of the dinghy after she had cut free of the ship. I tell you, Jim, there has to be an emotional outburst soon or she's going to be in bad psychological trouble later on."

Kirk glanced at Spock as if seeking a reaction, but the Vulcan's eyes seemed to be fixed on his boots. He stood rigid; the deep lines on his face might have been carved in stone. Kirk sighed audibly. "Well, we have at least four days before any definite decision need be made." He took a closer look at McCoy. There were dark circles under the doctor's eyes, and an unusual tenseness in his jaw hinted at some strongly-suppressed anxiety. "Are you all right, Bones? You look as if you haven't been to bed in a week."

"Nothing wrong with me, Jim, that a few days in the open air on a nice planet won't cure," said McCoy gruffly, as the lift stopped. Spock moved slightly, but said nothing. Together he and Kirk watched their friend stride off in the direction of Sickbay. There was a jauntiness in his step which deceived neither of them.

"You are right, Captain," said Spock finally. "The doctor is very deeply concerned with this patient. I sense an intensity of emotion which I cannot account for, and which is already proving harmful to his physical well-being."

"And what do we do on a Starship, Spock, when it is the doctor and psychologist who needs a doctor or a psychologist? You tell me!"

But Spock had no more to say for the present.

A few hours later, Kirk and McCoy sat in the Enterprise canteen eating their way through a juicy T-bone steak apiece (Kirk was trying out the theory that all McCoy really needed was a little feeding up). He saw Spock just emerging from the queue with his usual plate of mixed salad in his hand, and tried to catch the Vulcan's eye to signal him to come over and join them, but Spock was looking over their heads at something on the other side of the crowded room. Following the direction of his gaze, Kirk spotted the source of his First Officer's interest.

At a table for four sat three of his Bridge crew with Marinta, engaged in animated conversation, which was punctuated by bursts of

merriment and accompanied by much expressive gesturing. Uhura sat beside Marinta, talking to Sulu across the table, while Chekov hung on their every word, never taking his eyes off the pretty newcomer. Sulu's golden skin and Uhura's dusky one made an intriguing contrast to the alien girl's doll-like complexion and Chekov's northern pallor. The four heads, pale green, blue-black, mid brown and dark brown, were nearly touching over the table as their owners huddled closer to share some obviously wickedly funny anecdote.

Kirk felt a warm glow invade him as he watched them. This, he knew, was one of the reasons why he had joined Starfleet so long ago; the search, and the encounters, with new cultures to be studied and savoured, and new friendships to be formed and cultivated, were in his eyes what made life worth living. It was the salt and spice of existence: it was what Starfleet and the Federation were all about.

A voice just above his head made him jump.

"A fascinating foursome, are they not, Captain?"

"Spock! Sit down, man - you startled me for a moment. I was just thinking the same thing. They make a beautiful illustration of IDIC, don't they? I can't help feeling that sights like that make all the incidental problems and dangers fade into insignificance."

"Just look at our Pavel, Jim," said McCoy. Pushing his plate away with a satisfied grunt. "D'you all want to know what I think? I think he's definitely smitten."

"Smitten, Doctor?" said Spock, wrinkling his nose a little as the lingering odour of grilled meat assailed his sensibilities. "I fail to see any signs of infection or injury on the Ensign."

"That's because you can't see his heart, Spock," retorted McCoy. The joy of battle had come back into his eyes: he looked ready for anything.

"The heart is a pump, Doctor, and every anatomy student knows what it looks like. Pavel Chekov's heart appears to me to be functioning as normally as yours or mine. His breathing is not impaired, and there is even some colour in his cheeks."

"You know, Jim, sometimes I wonder who's the doctor around here! The Human heart is a vastly superior organ to the Vulcan one, Spock." He ignored the outraged eyebrow. "It fulfils two functions, whereas yours can only cope with one. In addition to pumping good red blood round the body, it is also the seat of the emotions - you know, Spock, those things Vulcans haven't got? It's obvious to anybody but a pointy-eared computer that young Pavel's falling in love, though he probably doesn't know it yet."

"The very use of the word 'falling', Doctor, is an admission that indulgence in this particular emotion is a regrettable accident, if not a grievous error. Yet you seem pleased at the possibility of Ensign Chekov's danger. I find this flagrant self-contradiction to be an alarming symptom of an unbalanced mental state."

"Then I'm in very good company, Spock, since all Humans from the greatest downwards have fallen in love at least once in their lives and some have left wonderful music and poetry and paintings to bear witness to it. Come to think of it, how is it that you unemotional Vulcans have a talent for music? Now *that* seems to me illogical, if you like!"

"Much Vulcan music is part of our ancient heritage, Doctor. The little that is composed today is usually the work of mathematicians and scientists - indeed, the Vulcan Science Academy includes a School of Music whose building is adjacent to the Physics Faculty Laboratories. Music as pattern and structure engages the intellect; it reflects the enduring universal relationships which are the signature of the Force that created the galaxies, a Being so far beyond ourselves that we pale in insignificance in its light. Music which induces and facilitates the contemplation of reality is a cathartic agent, purging the soul of the cares consequent upon the minor problems of day-to-day existence in our few and necessarily limited dimensions."

Ask a Vulcan a simple question and what did you get? McCoy felt as if he had been bludgeoned. He grasped convulsively at Spock's final remark much as a drowning man who has just fallen overboard into a very fast current might clutch at a rope sweeping past him.

"You mean music can make us forget our troubles, Spock?"

"I believe that is one of the things I said, Doctor." Spock felt he knew at that moment what poor Icarus went through when the wax melted.

"Well, thank you. I'll try to remember that." He picked up the used plates and stumped over with them to the waste disposal unit. Spock noticed that he went out of his way to avoid passing close to Sulu's and Uhura's table. Completely at a loss to understand why, he said nothing to Kirk but pigeon-holed the fact away for future reference.

McCoy walked wearily along the corridor leading to Kirk's quarters. He knew that the Captain's turn of duty on the Bridge still had another hour to run, but he could not bear to stay in his own cabin any longer. For the third night in a row he had tossed and turned in a vain effort to sleep, not closing his eyes until only a couple of hours separated him from the moment when he would have to be up again, and then it was only to be tormented by dreams which turned inexorably into nightmares out of which he awoke sweating and trembling, and more emotionally drained than ever. There were pills aplenty in his medical cabinets which could knock a man out for twelve or twenty-four hours or longer, but McCoy did not happen to believe in prescribing sedatives for people who were to all intents and purposes perfectly healthy, and he certainly thought he came into that category. He had tried counting sheep, and Klingons: recited to himself the names of all the drugs in the pharmacopoeia: endeavoured to recall the vital statistics of every planet he had ever visited: but it was all useless - sleep remained obstinately out of reach. He knew he was caught up in a vicious circle: not knowing why his nerves were so jangled merely made the condition more unbearable, and this in turn only irritated him further. The question was - how was he to break out of it?

Passing Kirk's door, he paused and looked in briefly, but as he expected the Captain's cabin was deserted. Outside the door next to that, he halted, braced himself, and knocked hesitantly. "Enter," said a familiar voice. McCoy gritted his teeth, went in and closed the door behind him.

"Forgive me if I am disturbing you, Spock." He stopped, for embarrassment made utterance difficult.

"No, Doctor. I have just finished the work I was engaged on. Please sit down. Is there a problem with which you require my help?"

"Er - no - no, Spock, nothing of that kind... I was wondering, would you... that is, do you feel in the mood - " An eyebrow lifted almost imperceptibly. "I mean, I just thought, if you were not too tired - " he stumbled on - "it would be nice to listen to some music... something completely different from anything I've got... I'm asking you a favour, Spock: would you play that harp of yours for me?..." His voice trailed away feebly as he waited for some blow to fall. Spock, who had been observing him with a certain growing but carefully hidden dismay, stood up and reached his instrument down from the wall.

"Fortunately, Doctor," he said evenly, "mood does not come into it for a Vulcan. And a change of occupation is always refreshing to the mind. I will play for you with pleasure. Perhaps something not too Vulcan to begin with?"

McCoy stared at him in some surprise. Had Spock just made a joke? - and at his own expense? But the sounds of the harp were already filling the small room. Chords, strange to him yet not unharmonious, gave way to a sweet, rising melody. Its phrases, repeated at different intervals, echoed one another, mirrored each other, dissolved into harmonies in a new key, then reappeared in fresh combinations, their notes changing places in a kind of light-hearted dance, which continued for a time, before being mysteriously transformed into a slower, more reflective melody, which was then absorbed in its turn into another series of ever-moving patterns of sound. Then, suddenly and unexpectedly, these melted into the chords from which the whole piece had unfolded. The music fell to a soft ending. The meditation was over.

McCoy gave a deep sigh. He looked across at the player, who sat unmoving as if oblivious of his presence, his head bent above his instrument, his long expert fingers still stretched over its quiet strings, holding them down, not breaking the enchantment. For once in his life McCoy felt no inclination to speak. The warm silence of the room seemed alive and vibrant, full of wordless meanings, yet soothing to his tattered nerves. As he gazed into the red flame leaping and dancing noiselessly in the small dark fire-pot on its plain metal stand, he felt himself relaxing, letting go; it no longer seemed to matter so much whether he got to sleep or not ever again. Perhaps he might even learn to emulate Spock and develop the capacity to do without it altogether! Just as the idiocy of this notion was beginning to strike him, the harp spoke again, and this time its language was utterly alien.

Made up of apparently unrelated notes, its phrases, broadening and increasing in intensity, swept him upwards as it on powerful wings. A hot desert air seemed to envelop him as the voice became more insistent, more passionate. While he still struggled to get his mental bearings the sounds fused in an extraordinary outburst, a discord which seemed to contain and yet go beyond all the harmonies he had ever heard. Out of its dying chromatic patterns there then crept a simple and poignant melody which awakened in his mind memories from the lost days of Joanna's childhood. A verse came back to him:

"The water is wide: I cannot get o'er,

And neither have I wings to fly - "

but hadn't he, only just now, been flying? The song continued in his memory:

"Give me a boat that will carry two..." McCoy was drifting now,



fighting no longer, completely at the mercy of the warmth, the music, his memories, and his fatigue; by the time the little tune reached its confiding close he was deeply and profoundly asleep at last, held safely in the spell of this alien room which was yet so strangely linked to the atmosphere of Earth.

Laying aside his instrument, Spock went silently to a closet in the wall and took from it a fine black wool robe which he laid gently over the doctor's unconscious form. He stood a few moments looking down at his guest, deep concern clearly visible in his eyes. There was of course no one to see. Then he went to his work-table, wrote a brief note, and passing through the connecting door into Kirk's cabin, placed it in open view on the Captain's desk. Returning to his own quarters he composed himself for a meditative vigil.

A quarter of an hour had passed when he heard a single faint tap on the door. Rising swiftly he went across and opened it. Kirk stood there holding the note, an expression of surprise and ill-suppressed curiosity on his face. Spock raised a finger to his lips and stood aside so that Kirk could see McCoy's slumbering form. "Can we talk in your cabin, Jim?" he whispered. Kirk withdrew a step and beckoned him inside. Spock slid the door quietly shut behind him.

"I don't think we should wake him, Captain," he said in an undertone. "His exhaustion is such that he needs to sleep undisturbed as long as his body will let him, and wake naturally when he is ready, I also think it will be best if he finds only you here when that happens. Humans are so easily embarrassed by what they feel to be weakness. As you know I must be on duty shortly on the Bridge and shall be well out of his way."

"I don't quite understand, Spock, what he was doing in your room in the first place."

"It is quite simple, Captain. He came to ask me to play for him, and I complied. In the middle of my second piece he fell fast asleep. Perhaps you could say I bored him into it?"

"On the contrary, Spock - I would say you are a man of remarkable talents and no little sensitivity. Don't flinch - there's no one else here who can hear me! Do you have any inkling - have you been able to find out - what it is that's worrying him? Why, for instance, hasn't he been sleeping?"

"I think he came to me, Captain, because he knew I would not ask him any questions or seek to invade his personal privacy. But logic would suggest we look for a new element in the situation: what has changed? What has appeared that was not here earlier? I can think of only one thing: the presence of the alien girl."

"What on earth are you suggesting, Spock? He's old enough to be her father!"

"Yes, Jim. That is precisely it."

Kirk looked at his First Officer in hopeless bafflement. But he knew that tone of voice all too well. It said, more clearly than words, "*For now the subject is closed.*"

Some time later, before he turned in himself, Kirk tip-toed into

Spock's cabin to check that McCoy was all right. The doctor slept the sleep of exhaustion. He looked exposed and vulnerable and the signs of strain were only too evident. Kirk's heart smote him: why had he not found the time to spend an evening with Bones and persuade him to confide his troubles? Full of good resolutions for the morrow, he went quietly back to his own bed, leaving the connecting door open so as to hear if his friend stirred, or needed anything.

When he awoke, he saw to his horror that eight hours had gone by. There had been no sound from Spock's cabin to wake him. Leaping up, he hurried over to the doorway and peered in. To his amazement there was no one there at all. The black robe lay, neatly folded, in the chair Bones had occupied, its silver embroidery gleaming in the fire-light. A scrap of paper lying on top bore a brief message: "My apologies, Spock - and my thanks. Bones."

Kirk retreated and closed the door, shaking his head resignedly. Why did the fact that he had slept like a log himself make him feel so guilty? Captain's privilege? Why not?... But that had never really struck him as a good excuse for anything...

* * * * *

CHAPTER THREE

The Enterprise was in orbit around Talasson; the physical appearance of the planet even at this distance certainly gave promise of good things to come. Kirk finished briefing his assembled officers, who, except for Spock, were wearing camouflage combat gear.

"Mr. Spock, you will beam down first, together with Lieutenants Uhura and Sulu, and three security men led by Jones. I shall follow with Ensign Chekov and Doctor McCoy; Varon and his colleagues will accompany us. Mr. Scott, you have charge of my ship, as Lieutenant Johnson is quite competent to look after the engine room. Lieutenant Shana will take over Bridge communications while we are down on the planet's surface. Phasers on stun before beaming down, Mr. Spock, and keep your eyes open, all of you."

The first group left the room smartly; Kirk and his remaining officers followed them at a more leisurely pace.

"Why does the Captain always have to teach us to suck eggs?" complained Sulu as they prepared to take their places on the transporter pads. "He reminds me of my old Dad when I had my first car. 'Take care now, Hikaru'," he mimicked. "'Mind how you go, my boy.' 'Watch out for the law, son'."

"Honestly, Sulu," said Uhura, "he only cares what happens to us, that's all! Quit grumbling! Some Captains don't give a tinker's cuss, you know."

Spock, making a mental note of the expressions he had not heard before, merely said, "Energise, Mr. Kyle." The Transporter Chief obeyed, and they shimmered out of sight.

As the second trio from Security entered the Transporter Room, Kyle heard the sounds of an argument going on in the corridor just outside. A girlish voice dominated the rest.

"Oh, Doctor, *please* let me come with you. The Captain doesn't object, do you, Captain? I'm perfectly all right now, really I am. I'm just dying to see this planet and Lieutenant Uhura's been so

kind, lending me this outfit to go exploring in!" She fixed McCoy with a soft greenish-blue gaze, full of child-like coaxing.

Kirk was amused by the wheedling tone, but to his surprise all it seemed to produce in the doctor was an unaccountable stiffening of the spine. However, the obviously robust physical condition of McCoy's ex-patient won the day; any misgivings he still had about her mental state remained unexpressed.

"All right, Marinta," he said grudgingly. "I guess you could do with a little fun at that. Just promise me not to knock that arm again just yet. Modern techniques are wonderful, of course, but broken bones need a day or two longer, you know, before they're back in mint condition."

"Oh, Doctor, *thank* you! You are a pet!" - and before McCoy could do anything to prevent it she had thrown her arms around him and kissed him soundly on the cheek.

"Miss Marinta!" said Kirk severely, hiding a smile. "Please try to refrain from embarrassing my officers in public. They do have a position to keep up, you know." McCoy had released himself from her embrace as soon as he decently could, but not before Kirk had seen real fear in his eyes. He was still baffled by Spock's cryptic comment on McCoy's inexplicable states of mind. He himself felt no personal attraction to the girl: those extraordinary eyes of hers were quite beautiful, as he would be the first to admit, but there was a capacity about them which was like a barrier he had not been able to penetrate. You looked into them and marvelled at their changing colours, but they gave you back no reflections; he felt he had established no real communication with the spirit that lived behind them.

He turned briskly to the security guards still patiently awaiting their orders. "Varon, one of your men will have to stay behind as there are now four of us; get him to round up five colleagues and beam down immediately after us." Varon touched one of his men on the arm, with a nod; the man stepped down at once and left on the double. Kirk turned to Chekov. "Now, Ensign, while we're on the planet one of your tasks will be to keep an eye on this young lady and ensure her safety." Chekov gave a delighted smile and assisted Marinta, quite unnecessarily, on to the transporter pad next to his. Kirk and McCoy joined them.

"Right, Mr. Kyle: no more delays. Energise."

The group materialised, closely followed by the six additional Security men, in what resembled a green meadow. Their comrades who had preceded them hailed them from a little way off. As they moved to join forces Kirk saw that his boots were already wet over the ankles from the vegetation through which they were wading. He stooped and ran a curious hand through it. It felt like grass - thick, juicy blades of it, all wet with rain. Or was it a heavy dew? the sky was blue and cloudless and there was a pleasant freshness in the air which hinted at warmth to come. As he sniffed it appreciatively he caught the unmistakable whiff of salt water. A good man, Kyle: they had been set down in the exact spot that Kirk had suggested after studying Spock's preliminary scan of the planet's surface configuration - on a wide, open stretch of ground a little higher than sea level but not too far from the shore. Kirk had been a little disappointed when the scanners had failed to reveal any

life-forms on the surface apart from animal species; but that might simply mean that the pirates were still in space. Since they had blown the Xorentis to smithereens after looting her, it was plain that they considered their own vessel to be superior, and who knew where they might be now? Kirk would have given a great deal to know their ship's capabilities and range, but Marinta had not been able to give him much in the way of facts to go on. In the circumstances, he could not blame her. But if the Enterprise party could discover the pirates' hideout before they returned, always supposing that Talasson was the base of their operations, it would give Kirk the priceless advantage of surprise when it came to launching an attack.

Meanwhile, in the distance loomed forest, which they would have to prospect for paths. If there were none and it proved to be virgin, he would have to think again. One thing he had already noticed: there was no single well-trodden path through the 'meadow' where they stood, only an infinite number of narrow little tracks running in all directions and marked here and there by little black oval droppings, obviously the calling-cards of some small herbivorous creatures thanks to whose grazing activities the uninvited visitors still enjoyed the comfort of dry trouser-legs.

At Kirk's bidding the entire party set off in the direction of the forest, led by Spock whose long legs carried him effortlessly ahead of everyone else in the first minute. He was quite unconscious of the fact that every line of his body and every springing stride he took betrayed to his smiling shipmates, who were rapidly getting out of breath in their efforts not to be left too far behind, the innocent pleasure this rare opportunity for such exercise gave him.

"It's plain for all to see, Jim," panted McCoy. "Our Vulcan friend's enjoying himself, and we'll all witnesses to the fact!"

"Leave him alone, Bones," said Kirk sharply. "I like to see him enjoy himself. Also - he's the best scout this party's got, and I don't want him distracted."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when they saw Spock come to a sudden halt. Without turning round he gestured to them urgently to wait.

"Drop," said Kirk instantly, suiting the action to the word. His followers obeyed.

Spock stared across the green expanse to the edge of the trees, where a movement had caught his eye. The next moment they all heard a faint, diffuse thudding noise which rapidly grew louder. Then when it was almost upon them, it suddenly stopped. Kirk cautiously raised his head. The next moment they were all scrambling to their feet, laughing helplessly, partly through the release of tension, partly at the absurd sight before them. The tall, dignified Vulcan stood knee-deep in a milling scrum of little brown quadrupeds about thirty inches high - motionless, because he was unable to move in any direction. Tiny black hooves churned up the ground all around him, and white scuts bobbed as their owners nuzzled their captive's legs and pushed their hard little heads against his hips. Kirk had the crazy notion that they were looking for pockets, from which, with luck, sugar lumps or bits of juicy apple might emerge. *What a pity regular Starfleet uniforms had no pockets!* he thought: Spock had nothing to buy his freedom with.

"Oh, just look, Captain!" Uhura breathed in his ear. "Aren't they adorable? They're so tame and friendly. Mayn't we go and

rescue Mr. Spock? I'm longing to stroke one."

But Spock laid his hand on the head of the biggest one, as if attracted in spite of himself. You might almost have thought he was communing with it. Then as he straightened up again the whole bunch took off at a tiny gallop back to the forest edge, from which faint tearing sounds soon began to float back to them through the pure air.

"Well, I'm damned!" said McCoy. "D'you think he could pull the same trick with lions or snakes, Jim? It'd make me feel a whole lot safer!"

"There are no creatures the size of lions on this planet, Doctor," said Spock, who after picking his way delicately through the new-made mud, had quietly rejoined them. "As for reptiles, well, we must all be alert, as the Captain advised earlier." He glanced in Sulu's direction, with a certain glint in his eyes which made the Lieutenant hastily lower his own. "May I suggest we push on to the forest as quickly as possible, Captain? I think you will find it interesting."

As they approached the forest edge their ears were assailed by an extraordinary medley of sound. They looked up and saw that the high canopy was alive with birds of every description and hue. Cooing, trilling, cawing, their bright plumage lighting up the green gloom as they darted from one tree trunk to the next or dropped lightly from one branch to another, the singers showed no alarm at the intrusion of Kirk's people into their domain. The party stood transfixed by the sheer beauty of the music pouring out all around them from invisible feathered throats. From somewhere in the heart of the forest came long looping calls of flute-like sweetness; there were whole cascades of whistled notes, interspersed with single piercing drops of sound, peals of almost human laughter, whoops and shrieks and long drawn out hootings, all against an incessant background of leaves rustling, feathers being flirited, wings vibrating, beaks tapping against bark. Marinta suddenly joined in with a high-pitched squeal of delight. They turned, and saw a little green and orange bird perched on Chekov's head. It had long streamers for a tail, and the Ensign was dancing about in discomfort from one foot to the other as the streamers tickled his neck and their owner industriously foraged in his hair with its beak. Next moment, a blue and green 'macaw' alighted on Spock's shoulder, and hunching itself forward, peered with great interest into his face. Kirk heard a branch creak above his head; glancing up apprehensively, he saw a huge, gloriously-coloured and -crested bird staring down at him from the tree. Then it swooped, but he ducked just in time and it landed on the toe of his boot, where it stayed, nodding its head from side to side and chuckling with annoyance. He saw Uhura, a look of ecstatic delight on her face, standing with both arms outstretched, covered to her fingertips in tiny, jostling feathered creatures, all bobbing, swaying and curtsying as they tried to keep their own balance while pushing their neighbours out of the way. Their chirping was almost deafening. Sulu and McCoy, to his amusement, had taken temporary refuge from the onslaught in the depths of a great hollow tree, from which they were peeking out, *for all the world, he thought, like two vacant-eyed pumpkin-heads on a night of Hallowe'en.*

Feeling that things were beginning to get on top of him, Kirk turned to his First Officer. "Mr. Spock," he said, "will you - please get this bird off me?" Spock bent down obligingly and held out a finger. The bird hopped on to it. Spock, giving it no time to change its mind, quickly transferred it to his unoccupied shoulder.

The blue 'macaw' gave a squawk of protest, but stayed put. The two officers strolled over to McCoy's tree, Kirk carefully putting on an unconcerned expression. He was just opening his mouth when Spock beat him to it.

"Your deductions from what we have observed so far, Doctor?" he asked innocently. "I should be very interested to hear them."

"Well, for what it's worth, Spock," responded McCoy, "I'd say we stumbled into the Garden of Eden. So what does that make you? the serpent? or the Birdman of Alcatraz?" He stepped out of the tree, brushing dirt and cobwebs off his sleeves, followed by Sulu, whose eyes widened incredulously at the sight of Spock's avian bodyguard.

"The Garden of Eden: yes, Doctor," said Spock, surprisingly. "But before the serpent, don't you think, Captain?"

"Yes, Spock - of course! These creatures have never been given reason to fear. These birds - those animals out in the meadow: they've never met evil, that's obvious. There are no pirates here, or ever have been."

"It's a large continent, Jim," said McCoy. "Maybe we should try beaming down some place else - in the middle, or at the other end; what do you think? Provided Spock here can send our feathered friends about their business, that is."

"We have only to move out of the trees and back into the open, and I am sure you will find that their desire to be about their own concerns will make them forget their momentary curiosity about us." Turning to Kirk, Spock went on. "Permission to beam back up to the ship, sir? I would like to carry out a close detailed scan of this continent's surface. A thorough search, hectare by hectare, co-ordinated with your movements on the ground, will enable us to achieve our objective much more quickly and surely than continued exploration on foot can do alone. I have complete faith in the capacity of the ship's instruments to pinpoint the whereabouts of the Orions if they are present on the planet at this time."

"And I have equal faith in your abilities, Mr. Spock," answered Kirk. "Permission granted, of course. Contact me when you have information or suggestions that will be of help. Meanwhile we will continue to examine the terrain here. Good luck to all of us."

Spock was still shaking his head in muted disapproval of Kirk's 'luck' when the beam took him.

"Now, Lieutenant Sulu: you, Chekov, and Lieutenant Uhura, see if you can get along the top of the cliffs for half a mile or so. Dr. McCoy, you bring Marinta and we will make our way along the shore. It's just possible the pirates may have a cave hideout in the face of the cliffs, with access from the sea, so that they may never have needed to penetrate inland at all. Security, divide yourselves as equally as you can between our two groups. Rendezvous back at this spot when we have determined whether there are any signs of intrusion within the distance I have indicated. If anyone does find anything, let me know at once."

Checking their communicators and setting their phasers on stun, the two groups set off with tricorders at the ready. Kirk and his little party found an easy slope down to the shore. Bands and ridges of pebbles edged with weed ran along just below the foot of the cliffs, but nearer the water there was pleasanter walking along firm

sand. Kirk scanned the cliffs above them for darker patches which might be the mouths of caves, but saw nothing; although Marinta called to them several times excitedly that she had found a path, when the guards checked they always discovered that it petered out not far away, in the middle of a thicket of low, sprawling and sometimes very thorny scrub.

"Just animal tracks, I'm afraid, Marinta," said Kirk, trying not to damp her enthusiasm. "They probably have their burrows in the base of the cliff. All those thorn and low branches constitute an excellent deterrent to pursuers."

"You know, Jim, it's a long time since I walked along beach," said McCoy dreamily. "Then, I do believe I was carrying a bucket and spade."

As he spoke scores of white and grey birds came flying towards them from the direction of some large tumbled blocks of stone further down the shore. Squawking and screeching they settled on the sand around the party and waddled confidently towards their feet, where they strutted to and fro, their heads cocked to one side and bright inquisitive eyes staring upward. For a moment there Kirk was reminded so strongly of someone that an unconscious smile curved his lips. He squatted down and put out a friendly hand. This proved to be a serious mistake.

"Bones! Quick! It's got my finger! I think it imagines I'm its lunch!" He gave a yelp of pain. Marinta's hand flew to her mouth to stifle a laugh.

McCoy bent down and prised open the bird's beak. It released Kirk's finger with marked reluctance. "Shoo! Shoo!" said McCoy. The bird moved away about a foot and stopped again, looking up hopefully. "Do you think Starfleet Commissariat would sanction an order for bags of breadcrumbs for the natives, Jim? I know they frown on cheap mirrors and glass beads, but this would be a tad more progressive, wouldn't it?"

Kirk's reply was lost in a sudden outburst of screaming birdcalls; in a flash the whole flock rose into the air and wheeled about in the sunshine; then they streamed off in a long line over the sea, where they began diving below the waves and reappearing with fish flapping helplessly in their bills.

"Just as I thought," said McCoy grinning. "Their interest in us was purely mercenary - mere cupboard love!"

At the rockfall it became quite clear that further progress was out of the question. Part of the cliff was now lying in the sea and there was no way to scale those immense boulders without proper climbing equipment. "In any case, Jim," said McCoy, "it's obvious that since the seabirds are as tame as the forest creatures, there's been no disturbance here by any alien predators - Humans, Orions, Klingons or whatever."

"Yes, you're right. Well, it's no more than I expected. When we get back to our arrival point I intend to put a different plan into operation."

They retraced their steps along the beach, enjoying the tangy air and the play of sunlight on the water as it rippled up to their feet and withdrew again leaving scallop shapes of foam on the sand. Marinta, her boots slung over her shoulder, was splashing happily

along beside Kirk, ankle deep, her green hair blowing untidily in the wind. She looked like a child on holiday. Kirk found himself wishing he could spend all day down here doing nothing in particular; this was turning out to be one of those times when attending to the call of duty seemed more than usually hard.

In the meadow Sulu's group lay prostrate in the grass, apparently in the last stages of exhaustion. All were perspiring freely and the Security men's heavy-duty outdoor gear looked considerably the worse for wear. There were tears in their sleeves, bits of braid and insignia had been ripped from their jackets, and brown burrs clung to their trousers. Sulu had cunningly put them in the lead, followed by Chekov and then Uhura, while he himself brought up the rear, so it was they who had borne the brunt of the struggle against the thick undergrowth and tangled scrub through which the party had had to make its way. Sulu believed in making the men under his command feel wanted. They were all much taller and heftier than he was, after all! He really felt that this morning they had justified their keep.

"Oh, Captain!" said Uhura as Kirk came up. She was trying without much success to restore order to her elaborate coiffeur. "I'm so glad you let me wear these old trousers instead of those flimsy tights. My legs would have been a mass of scratches by now without them.

"That's all right, Lieutenant," said Kirk. "Did you have any luck?"

"No, sir, we found absolutely nothing," said Sulu. "We were constantly ambushed by birds and small animals, and whipped in the face by springy branches, but apart from that, Captain, not a sign of life. Nobody's ever been that way before, I'm certain. What about the shore route, sir?"

"Totally unproductive too, I'm afraid," said Kirk. He snapped open his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise. Come in, please."

"Scott here, Captain," replied a voice.

"Scotty: in the absence so far of fresh information from Mr. Spock I wish to try a new tack. Can you transport us directly to a point, say fifty miles north of our present position?"

"Aye, Captain - of course."

"And could you repeat that manoeuvre at previous-arranged intervals? I want to get the feel of the place in as many different locations as possible. We don't need to stay in each very long: say one standard hour?"

"Aye, Captain. I get the idea. I'll just check with Mr. Spock, who'll choose ye a reasonable point to beam down again. Did ye want approximate fifty-mile intervals between all your exploration sites?"

"That's right, Scotty. I'll signal you in one minute from now that we're ready to go." He looked around. His people were already on their feet, in two tight clusters, looking at him expectantly; Chekov, he noted, held Marinta's hand in a firm grasp.

"Right, Mr. Scott," he said. "Two groups ready to be beamed across."

Their new arrival point was on a hillside, down which ran a narrow brook fringed with short dark flowering rushes. From lower down came the faint splash of miniature cascades and the gurgle of water sucked onwards between narrowly separated projecting boulders. The forest lay behind them, but more trees rose up ahead, while to their left an exposed rock ridge was outlined against the blue sky.

"Split up as before," said Kirk. "But this time I want Ensign Chekov to stay here with Marinta to serve as a sort of base. I'll explore the ridge: Mr. Sulu, you take a look at the lower sections of the stream. Two guards are to stay with the Ensign and keep an eye on the outskirts of the forest areas. The others, come with us - and don't worry about those uniforms: Starfleet's not short of a credit or two."

Kirk hoped that the crest of the ridge would provide an extensive view in all directions from which he might get some idea as to the validity of further exploration. He had a totally irrational urge to contact Spock and demand some results, but refrained: Spock would be working faster than anyone else could and his thoroughness was a guarantee that no evidence would be overlooked. Kirk knew he would just have to possess his soul in patience and keep on trying at his end.

He also knew what the real trouble was, of course; the beauty of this planet was starting to get to him, and it was a feeling he didn't like. If it had not been so peaceful, so untouched, so absolutely virginal, he could have sworn it had a siren voice, enticing, lulling, luring him from the path he had chosen so long ago to follow. *"Stay here,"* murmured the voice in his brain. *"Here you will find content and happiness. This is Paradise. No Adam and Eve, no Serpent, no God walking in the garden, no flaming sword. You wouldn't be lonely: Spock would join you. There would be no one here to taunt him about his origins, or his appearance. It would be all yours. Think about it. No one need ever know."*

He was jerked back to sanity by a pair of hands clapped suddenly across his eyes. "Guess who, Captain?" said a giggly, breathless voice. Kirk freed himself brusquely and turned to face her. "What are you doing here, young woman? I thought I told you - "

"Oh, please don't be cross, Captain: I beat Dr. McCoy to the top easily, but I didn't have a hope of getting here before you!" Her cheeks were quite flushed, her opalescent eyes shone. "I just had to see what was the other side of this ridge. Oh! isn't the view absolutely gorgeous?" As Kirk tried in vain to think of an adequate reprimand, McCoy came up the slope, walking easily and without apparent exertion, and joined them.

"No point in hurrying up steep hillsides," he remarked, looking round at the stunning panorama below them. "Why strain the heart when you needn't! Besides, we're here to enjoy ourselves, aren't we?" he added, with a provocative grin at Kirk.

"Don't tempt me, Bones! Now you're both here, have a good look round for any clue or sign that might indicate unusual activity, or habitation. If we don't find it here we shall have to look somewhere else."

Their scrutiny however revealed nothing but seemingly endless

stretches of wooded mountain-side, cut into by largely invisible valleys, and held in an empty expanse of ocean. Faint bird cries came up from below. When they rejoined the other group Sulu's report was similar.

"This place is just beautiful, Captain, and there's wild life everywhere: we've found not a trace of outside interference."

"Very well," said Kirk. "Then we'll move on and try again."

With the patient co-operation of Scott and Kyle they made three more flying visits, but all proved as fruitless as the first. By now dusk was falling over the land and the cooling air was filled with the delicate scents of trodden grass and night-opening flowers. Kirk saw that his people were getting tired and somewhat depressed by their continued lack of success, and knew that for the time being he too had had enough. He ordered a bivouac, gave instructions for the breaking-out of emergency over-night rations and the collection of brushwood and dry leaves for lying on, and entrusted to Sulu the posting of guards to keep watch in two-hour shifts until daybreak. It was fortunate that the mild climate, and the friendliness of all this planet's creatures, made a fire unnecessary; they could not afford to advertise their presence to anyone who might be watching.

Then he contacted Spock. But Spock had nothing positive to report either.

"So far, Captain, intelligent life-forms have been conspicuous by their absence, if I may be permitted to use an expression dear to Dr. McCoy - with the exception of your party, whose whereabouts is of course known. What are your immediate plans?"

"To let everyone get a good night's sleep, Spock. We will continue the search as soon as it's light."

"Do you wish me to contact you before then, Captain, if I detect any alien presence?"

"Only if you consider it puts us in immediate danger, Spock. Otherwise I will contact you eight hours from now. Make sure you get some sleep yourself: that's an order. Kirk out."

* * * * *

CHAPTER FOUR

The next morning Kirk was awakened an hour earlier than expected, by the muted beep of his communicator, which he had placed under his body for safety when he lay down. He struggled sleepily to a sitting position and flipped it open.

"Kirk here. Go ahead, Enterprise."

"Spock here, Captain. I apologise for disturbing your rest. I have information for you which I did not think should be delayed further. Five hours ago ship's sensors detected a small space-craft approaching the planet's surface. It appears to have amphibious capability as it is now floating off-shore at the northern end of the land-mass, that is, twelve hundred and fifty-nine, point two seven kilometres from your present position. We have been monitoring the activities of its occupants continuously since their arrival, but as there was no immediate danger it was not necessary to wake you sooner. There are twelve of them in all, and their physical

characteristics are identical with those of Orions."

"Well done, Mr. Spock. So we were right after all. The members of the landing party will be delighted to know that. What are the Orions doing at the moment?"

"They appear to have a camp one hundred and fifty feet above the sea, probably concealed among dense vegetation. I pinpointed their progress from the moment they left their ship to wade ashore. They made their way uphill into the forest and then halted. As there has been no detectable movement since, I infer that they are all asleep."

"Excellent, Spock. We'll break camp ten minutes from now. Meanwhile, work out the correct co-ordinates for Mr. Kyle to put us down at a point fifty yards from their camp and a good twenty feet higher. From there we'll have to play it by ear."

"Understood, Captain. I shall be joining you there. Spock out." Kirk started to protest, but he was too late: the transmission had been smartly terminated. He turned to the others, most of whom were already on their feet, yawning and stretching, and gave them a quick summary of events.

"So, ladies and gentlemen," he ended, "breakfast will have to be confined to concentrate tablets and glucose sweets. There's remarkably delicious water in this stream, as I'm sure you're already aware. The essential thing is not to waste time. If we want to catch these pirates wrong-footed, speed is most important."

Twenty minutes later both groups had been safely transported to Spock's co-ordinates, above the spot where they presumed the pirates' lair to be, and Spock himself had now rejoined the party, immaculate as ever and looking more alert and wide awake than anybody else. Kirk, who knew he must have been working most of the night and could not have snatched more than two consecutive hours' sleep out of the last twenty-four, was once more amazed at his First Officer's stamina and self-discipline. McCoy was filled with envy.

"How does that Vulcan do it, Jim?" he muttered in Kirk's ear. "In spite of everything he looks as fresh as a daisy. The very sight of all that rude health makes me feel tired before I start."

"We all know your strange prejudice in favour of the sick, Bones," said Kirk with a smile. "Personally I'd rather go pirate-hunting with a fit and healthy crew."

"Oh, of course, I'm not sorry he's here, Jim," said McCoy. "All that Vulcan muscle does give me extra confidence in the likelihood of our eventual survival. By the way - should you be tempted to repeat that, I shall deny every word, you hear?" Seeing the subject of their conversation approach, he moved away towards Chekov, standing with Marinta and Uhura on the fringe of one of the groups.

"What are your orders, Captain?" said Spock in a rather official tone intended to be heard by all. Taking the hint, they gathered round.

"We will move in single file downhill in two groups thirty yards apart, taking advantage of all available cover. Security, five of you go with Lieutenant Uhura and Doctor McCoy: Mr. Spock will lead you. Four others will accompany Mr. Sulu and myself. Ensign, I want you to take a central line of descent with Marinta and the other two guards but keep at least fifty yards to the rear of the two advance

groups. Should anything unexpected occur, I do not want to have to worry about her safety: is that clearly understood?"

"Aye, aye, Captain." Chekov gave his companion's hand a protective squeeze.

"Mr. Spock, you and I will communicate when we see or hear any sign of the enemy. From now on there will be no more conversation, and watch where you're setting your feet down. I'm sure you've all noticed the complete absence of bird song and animal noises in this section of the forest; that means that the slightest sound we make will warn the Orions that they are no longer alone. Take care, and good luck."

They set off through the trees, moving like Indians, their eyes searching the ground for any twig that might snap if trodden on. Spock and Kirk had their tricorders switched on to give warning of the proximity of the enemy, and every phaser the party carried was set on stun. Uhura's heart beat faster with excitement: her long-distant tracking ancestors must have felt like this, she thought, when they followed elephant, gazelle or leopard across the grasslands of faraway Africa. When she recalled the things Marinta had told them about the pirates she knew that some of the old savagery still cried out in her own blood. She felt as though she could not wait to get her hands on those devils. The disciplined, civilised part of her - the greater part, fortunately - fought back, struggling to contain her deep-welling, ferocious rage. As she gazed at the straight Vulcan back in front of her, and visualised the emotionless face and the cool, penetrating eyes, it found its weapon: shame. Her anger slowly congealed into something cold, relentless, but controlled. She was Lieutenant Uhura, of the U.S.S. Enterprise, and she would fight decently, with a phaser, as befitted someone trained to respect the basic rules of combat. The tigress within her backed down, growing, and withdrew for the present into its million-year-old den.

Spock stopped suddenly and held up a hand. His communicator was whispering an urgent message. "Mr. Spock? We've come in sight of a clearing. Some trees have been felled here, by axes. They make quite good cover. There is a large log hut, and a sort of stockade. We're going to crawl as near as we can get without being seen. I suggest you follow suit - you must be pretty close yourselves by now. Exercise the greatest caution and contact me if you see anyone. Kirk out."

Spock dropped to the ground and proceeded to crawl downhill, motioning to his party to follow. After a hundred yards or so of this uncomfortable method of locomotion, he saw through the thinning tree-trunks the hut the Captain had referred to. Signalling the others to wait, he crawled on further, pausing every so often to listen. Strange! His telepathic sense told him nothing: his sensitive hearing picked up no noises. Could the camp be deserted so soon? He continued to crawl till he reached the back of the hut. Then he heard a distinct rustle to his left, and froze. To his horror his communicator chose this particular moment to speak its piece: he put a hand over it hastily to muffle the sound.

"I have you in sight, Mr. Spock," it said cheerfully. "We can see no one in the clearing, and we can't hear any activity. I intend to take the bull by the horns and find out if that hut is occupied or not. Mr. Sulu and I are going in - quietly, in case they're all asleep inside - two minutes from now. I'd appreciate your support - bring Security along with you but leave McCoy: he's far more

valuable to us as a doctor than as a destroyer of worlds."

"Understood, Captain." Spock beckoned to the guards. They stood up and followed him cautiously round the side of the hut, phasers at the ready. There were no window-openings, only cracks between the logs which had been roughly thrown together in its construction. Spock tried to peer in but could see only blackness. Kirk's contingent appeared from the other side and ranged themselves in front of the closed door of the hut. Kirk beckoned, and the Vulcan moved over noiselessly and planted himself to one side of the door. Kirk nudged it gently, then waited. Nothing stirred. Then he flung it wide and swept the muzzle of his phaser round in a semi-circle to cover half the interior. Spock, by his side, covered the other half. Sulu stood at their backs with phaser drawn. Then, realising as their eyes grew accustomed to the semi-darkness, that they were threatening a completely empty room, the three officers relaxed, holstered their weapons and examined their surroundings. It did not take long. Heaps of dry and decaying leaves lay on the floor in the corners and along the sides of the clumsy shelter; a few tree stumps on their sides had been rolled in, probably to serve as seats; there was nothing resembling a table, but boxes of various sizes stood about, all padlocked, and most bore the remains of food. More garbage was scattered all over the beaten earth floor.

"I see no bull now, Captain, but the odour certainly suggests it was in here not long ago," said Spock, fastidiously wrinkling his nose and edging Kirk and Sulu outside again. Kirk gave him a sunny smile in return and close the door. They looked around the clearing. It too was littered with food scraps and gnawed bones, but rubbish of another kind had been dumped here as well: stained and worn clothing, wallets that had probably contained coins or credits, torn paper, cooking pots with holes, or handles missing, and broken bits of tarnished jewellery, the cherished possession once, no doubt, of some unfortunate victim. Fires had been lit all over the place, as heaps of black and grey ash testified. The ground was torn up and the vegetation trampled ruthlessly all round the perimeter of the clearing, while ripped-off branches and broken saplings marked two wide muddy trails leading away and downwards in the direction of the invisible sea. McCoy stood in the middle of the open space and surveyed the scene.

"Well, Jim, I acknowledge the unmistakable evidence of the presence of intelligent life-forms. If I didn't know our charming hosts were Orions I might have guessed Humans instead. What do we do next? Wait for them to show up and eat us?"

"There is no record of Orions even having committed cannibal acts, Doctor," began Spock.

"No, no, Spock - just a joke. I laugh, that I may not weep. Anyway, I'm feeling particularly tough today," continued McCoy. "I'd almost welcome the chance to give one or two of these destructive morons a bad case of indigestion - and that's just for starters. By the way, where's Ensign Chekov? Isn't he supposed to be looking after that girl?"

"They're probably snatching a few moments to gaze into one another's eyes without an interested audience standing round them, Captain," put in Uhura. "Look, there they are - I can just see them through the trees. Ah, they're coming now."

Kirk turned to speak to his First Officer but Spock had wandered over to the stockade and was walking slowly round it, examining it in

detail. As usual, his face gave nothing away, but his dark eyes looked grim. It was just an ordinary stockade, made of poles lashed together with rope. A metal chain with a padlock on the end hung loosely from the door. Kirk went over and joined him. "A corral for captured animals?" he wondered aloud. "No, of course not, it's too high. A slave-pen, perhaps?"

"Or a temporary holding-place for hostages," returned Spock gravely. "Notice the loops of rope attached to the poles round all four sides. They are frayed with rubbing, and I am as certain as I can be without laboratory confirmation that the stains on them are those of human blood. Over there, in that corner, there is a length of knotted rope, which has been immersed in sea water. It bears similar stains."

Kirk tried his strength against one of the poles. It did not budge. "Sunk fairly deep in the ground, I'd say. Quite primitive compared with some of the prisons that you and I have shared, Spock, but you don't need force-fields in a place like this. Not much chance of civilian prisoners, or women and children, getting out of here on their own. We must do something about this, my friend: we really must. The Prime Directive has already been violated by the enemy - if, that is, they can be said to have violated a principle of which they have never heard; we shall be endeavouring to restore things, as far as possible, to the state which Nature intended should be theirs."

He turned swiftly at the sound of running feet. But it was only Sulu, who came bursting into the clearing with two of his broad-shouldered henchmen at his heels. "Captain!" he said, panting. "We've just been a little way down one of those trails, to the edge of the trees. There's an outcrop of low rocks below that, and when we squinted over the top, what do you think? The Orions are all down there in the water, splashing around and shouting and rubbing each other's backs with handfuls of sand. We saw two or three lying on the beach in the sun, getting dry. From the way they kept glancing up at the hillside I got the impression it won't be long before they start coming back. They can't have had their breakfast yet, can they!"

"Very interesting, Mr. Sulu. Thank you. I think it's time we set up our trap. Fifteen of us and only twelve of them; it shouldn't take long to overpower them. Ensign, I shall want you in on this; so, Doctor McCoy, please take Marinta into those trees and keep her out of sight. Lieutenant Uhura, will you take cover over there and be ready to contact the ship should need arise."

Uhura compressed her lips and seemed about to protest at being allotted this passive role, but Kirk had already moved on. "No grumbling, Nyota darling," said a sly voice beside her. "It's only because the Captain cares! Why doesn't he care about poor Hikaru? it must be because you're prettier!" Uhura glared at him and stalked off; the taste of her own advice was like hot pepper in her mouth. Dear, handsome Sulu! One of these fine days she would get him for that innuendo. What made her really mad was her inability to produce a truly withering reply on the spot.

Kirk finished placing his men in a large semi-circle behind convenient trees just outside the edge of the clearing. "You last three from Security," he called - "come back here and join me behind the hut. No one is to show themselves till I give the signal. Remember, it's prisoners we want, not corpses, gentlemen, so set your phasers accordingly."

As Sulu had predicted, they did not have long to wait. Crashing sounds soon came up from down below. Then raucous voices were heard, singing and shouting: some sounded distinctly quarrelsome, others not entirely sober. As the noise drew nearer, Kirk's men gripped their phasers tighter and braced themselves ready for his signal. A bush rustled faintly on the lower edge of the clearing; there seemed to be a slight breeze now, stirring the treetops. Then, rather oddly, the noises died away again and the unnatural silence returned. The well-trained Enterprise people remained at their posts, motionless, waiting. Kirk was divided between puzzlement and disappointment: what was happening? Could their prey be engaged on some kind of early morning exercise? a race to the top of the hill, to keep them on their toes? His eyes wandered speculatively round the clearing for the hundredth time. Then he froze in appalled disbelief. There, out in the open, on the ground, lay a black, shiny object, glinting momentarily in a ray of sunlight just beginning to filter through the trees. It was a Starfleet communicator, which someone had dropped. Before he had time to think what to do, bloodcurdling yells burst forth among the trees, above the clearing; the next second, all hell broke loose. The Enterprise party found itself surrounded and fighting for dear life. A heavy body smashed into Kirk from behind and he went down sprawling; two hands gripped his neck in a stranglehold which he vainly tried to break. He brought a leg up desperately to knee his attacker in the groin, but the Orion twisted agilely aside and kept on squeezing. A red mist began to form before Kirk's eyes; he felt them bulge almost out of his head as he waited for his windpipe to crack under the relentless pressure. Then suddenly it was all over. He felt the Orion become a dead weight: the killing grip was gone. Looking up gratefully he saw Sulu silhouetted above him, his phaser still trained on the unconscious pirate. Kirk rolled over, gasping, and sat up. Then he realised that the pirate was dead.

"Why, Lieutenant?" he croaked, scrambling to his feet and exploring his neck tenderly with one hand. "My orders were quite - "

"I'm sorry, Captain: my phaser controls have had a knock - I can't set it on stun or on full: it seems to have got jammed somewhere in between. I simply couldn't let that creep strangle you. Excuse me..." and Sulu charged off to make his presence felt elsewhere. Fights had spilled over from the woods into the clearing, and the noise was atrocious. The Enterprise crew fought silently and efficiently, but their enemies kept up a continuous barrage of deafening howls and screeches whose nerve-shaking ferocity was unequalled in all Kirk's experience; furthermore, they were using every dirty trick in the book (and several that were not) with a savage enjoyment that made him shudder inwardly in revulsion. Several of his people were streaming with blood: two guards lay unmoving where they had fallen. He heard a sharp crack to his left, and saw Spock drop the unconscious bodies of two pirates who had jumped him simultaneously, and whose heads he had been forced to bang together in order to free himself from their murderous attentions.

"I think help is needed over there, Captain," panted the Vulcan. Together they ran across the clearing. Security, which seemed to be thinner on the ground than it should have been, was fending off with difficulty the concerted attack of four Orions armed with knives who had waded in before the Enterprise men had had time to bring their phasers into action. Crushing down his repugnance, Spock joined Kirk in the melee. Their additional strength turned the scales, but not without serious casualties on both sides. As Kirk freed an arm sufficiently to stun one fiercely struggling Orion with a blow of his fist, he felt a sharp pain in the other, followed by a

burning sensation, and something hot and wet started to trickle down inside his sleeve. The next moment the Orion he hadn't seen hit the dust and lay in an unmoving heap beside him. "Let me see that slash, Jim," said an anxious voice. Firm hands removed his combat jacket and eased the arm out of his tunic sleeve, which was already uncomfortably sticky with blood. Spock quickly examined the wound, then relaxed visibly. "Not very deep fortunately, Captain; just a flesh wound. The profuse bleeding is to be expected." He produced a long strip of white material apparently out of nowhere and tied it firmly round Kirk's arm. Then he helped him to put the jacket back on.

Sulu appeared in front of them and said, "Everything is under control now, Captain; resistance is at an end."

"Thank you, Mr. Sulu," said Kirk, getting back on his feet with an effort. The ground swam before his eyes for a moment, but Spock kept him from falling.

"You should let Doctor McCoy see that arm as soon as possible, Captain: my rough bandage will not hold the bleeding for long."

"My God, Spock, I feel as if I had been pummelled all over," complained Kirk, as the stiffness began to build up in his legs and back.

"Naturally, Captain; that is precisely what has happened to you," replied Spock coolly. Kirk looked at him, but could detect no shadow of a smile. He did however see a huge green and violet bruise on his friend's right cheekbone. Spock also had a cut lower lip, and his hair was in a wild tangle as if someone had tried to pull it out by the roots.

"Time to count the casualties, I'm afraid," said Kirk, pulling himself together. "This little affair did not turn out quite as I had envisaged." They limped over to the stockade. Bodies lay everywhere; here and there people sat, stood or leaned, examining their own and each other's injuries. McCoy was going round making a quick check on the Enterprise party, while Marinta still hovered uncertainly a little way off, behind a tree.

"These two guards are dead, Jim," he said, "and there's a third unconscious over there by the stockade. But there are still three others unaccounted for. And Lieutenant Uhura is nowhere to be found either. Hadn't you better start looking for her?"

Before Kirk could reply, Sulu was back at his elbow. "Six Orions dead, Captain," he reported. "We've tied up the other two here and shut them in the stockade. Two security men are on guard outside it. I'm worried about Chekov, sir: he's got a nasty gash on the head. I can't get any sense out of him."

McCoy was across the clearing and kneeling by Chekov's side before Sulu had finished his sentence. Kirk turned abruptly to the little group of security men who were still licking their wounds. "Tarno," he said, "you and two others come with me. We're going to comb these woods till Lieutenant Uhura is found. The rest start over on the other side and work your way round to join us."

They came upon Uhura much sooner than expected. She was sitting with her back against a tree and her head on her knees: dishevelled but alive. Kirk's heart gave a thump of relief. He rushed up and grabbed her by the shoulders. To his astonishment she was trembling

violently.

"Thank heaven you're still with us, Lieutenant! Are you all right? Can you stand?"

Uhura got to her feet as if dazed, automatically brushing off the woodland debris that clung to her uniform. Tearstains were visible in the dirt and blood that caked her face. "It's all right, Uhura," soothed Kirk, patting her shoulder. "The fighting's over. I'll take you back to the others."

He turned as he spoke, ready to slip a steadying hand under her arm should she need it, caught his foot in something soft and yielding, and would have fallen headlong if Tarno had not caught him in time. He looked down and found himself staring into the features of a dead Orion. The pirate's filthy clothing was almost the same colour as the dead leaves and twigs of the forest floor where he lay.

"Uhura?" said Kirk, aghast. "What happened?"

"I apologise for being caught off guard, Captain: he jumped me from behind. He must have come from above the encampment. I never heard a thing till he had his knife at my throat. I couldn't get my phaser on him. I never was so frightened in all my life, but I managed to grab his wrist and shove all my weight into his diaphragm, and he went over my head into those bushes. As he didn't try to get up, I covered him with my phaser and went to have a closer look. Then I saw he'd fallen on his knife blade." She gave a convulsive shudder. "It was awful, Captain - I'll never forget those dreadful gurgling noises. He was spurting blood and clutching the dirt with his hands, trying to speak. And then, as I stood there, he died... I haven't killed anyone in a very long time, Captain - it all happened so fast that I didn't have time to plan. I thought I loathed these monsters, but I swear to you, sir, that if I could bring him back to life - "

"You reacted in absolutely the right way, Lieutenant," interrupted Kirk gently. "Everyone has the right of self-defence. I'm just very relieved to see that you're alive. Tarno, Lieutenant Uhura and I will go back to the clearing: you go and help look for your missing colleagues and report to me as soon as you find them.

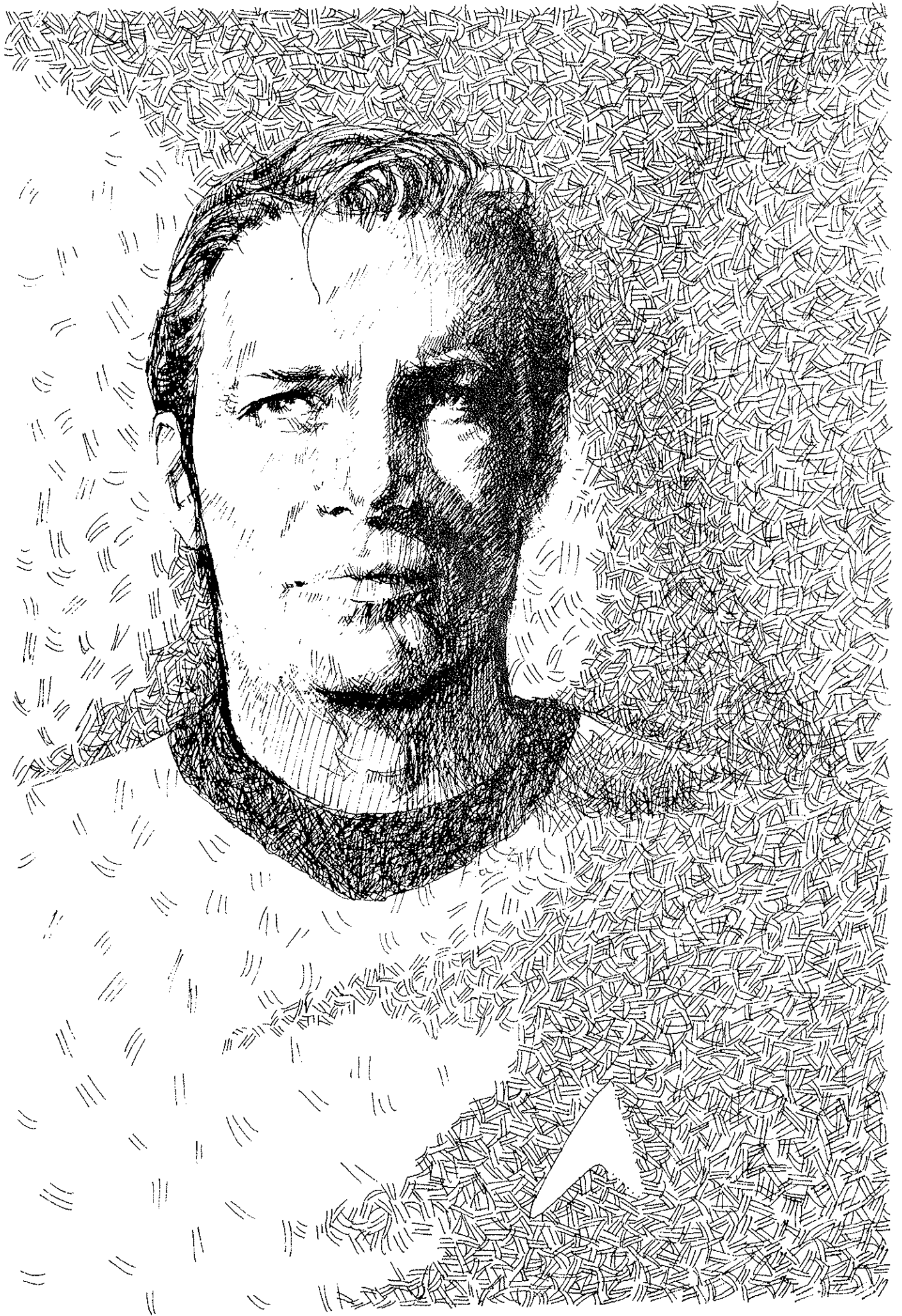
Catching sight of Marinta still skulking alone behind her tree, Kirk had an inspiration.

"Lieutenant," he said, "will you go and persuade that frightened child to come out into the open now, and join us? Make her understand that the pirates can't hurt her ever again. When she feels able, I'll want her to see if she recognises either of those two in the stockade."

"Yes, Captain," said Uhura, brightening. She had her shaky nerves under control now. It was amazing how a few minutes in Kirk's invigorating presence had made her feel herself again, and she was very glad to have something to do which would take her mind off her recent experiences.

Ignoring the dull ache in his arm, Kirk called Spock and Sulu over.

"Gentlemen, there's something I need to know. Does each of you have his communicator on his person?"



"Yes, Captain." Spock held his out.

"Here, Captain," said Sulu, doing likewise.

"Thank you, gentlemen: you can put them away again." Seeing Sulu's puzzled look, he added, "I don't need to borrow one: I have my own right here. I'm afraid there's a more serious reason for my question. Lieutenant, will you just go and find out if Chekov is wearing his?"

"Right, sir." Sulu was off in a flash. Spock raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

"I'm sorry, Spock: I had to make sure. You'll understand why shortly."

"Chekov's communicator is still on his belt, Captain," reported Sulu. "But there are bits of metal trampled into the ground over there that could be the remains of one. Is a communicator missing, sir?"

"You could say that, Mr. Sulu." Kirk went over to Marinta and Uhura. "Lieutenant, are you feeling better?"

"Much better, Captain, thank you," Uhura replied. "Marinta says she is ready to face the prisoners whenever you wish, sir."

"Good girl, Marinta. You need only give them a quick glance. They won't be able to harm you - they're under guard now and behind bars. Lieutenant - I need you for a moment. Do you have your communicator handy?"

"Yes, Captain." She reached inside her jacket. Then a puzzled expression settled on her face. "That's strange, sir: it's not here." She bent down and looked around her on the ground. "What on earth could have happened to it? I could have sworn..."

Kirk felt a cold chill go down his spine. "Think back, Lieutenant: did you check it before the fighting started?"

"N-no, sir: I don't believe I did. But I'm sure I'd have noticed if it had been missing - I'm used to the feel of it inside my jacket."

"Well, then - could you have lost it during your struggle with that pirate?"

"I must have, I suppose, Captain. I'll go right back and start looking."

"Wait a second, Lieutenant: take these two men from Security to help you. You'll find it much more quickly when three of you are looking." He hoped fervently that his cheerful words would be proved true. The wound in his arm was throbbing quite painfully now, but it would have to wait a while longer.

Tarno emerged from among the trees. He came up to Kirk and saluted. His face was white and set.

"Bad news, Captain. We've found our missing colleagues. I'm afraid they're all dead, sir: they were set on from behind and their assailants had knives. Quitzel, my friend - " his voice faltered - "I mean, he ~~was~~ my friend: he was still alive when we came on him,

and he was able to tell us a little about what happened."

"Yes: go on, Tarno; take your time." The words were calming, but Kirk's face was grim.

"Fiedler was killed outright; but Sarka, he heard something, and moved, so the knife got him in the arm and not the back, and he defended himself. He killed the Orion that had tried to knife him, but then he was attacked by the one that had killed Fiedler, and that was just too much for him, I reckon. Quitzel was badly hurt in his own little fight but he managed to get over to Sarka and help him finish off Fiedler's killer. Sarka was losing blood so badly by then, no one could have saved him, Captain. Quitzel held him till he died, and that's how we found both of them. We've brought the three of them down to the hut - it's been cleaned out as far as possible, sir - and laid them next to Jones and Varon." He swallowed hard and went on. "There's three dead pirates left in the forest, Captain. What do you want us to do with them?"

"I'll let you know later, Tarno. We'll need a detail to dig a grave for our dead comrades, but I'd like to find a better resting-place for them than this grubby little battlefield. Your men behaved with great courage, and will be buried with proper honours, I promise you. Now, there's something I want you to verify for me. Among the eleven of you there were only three carrying communicators - am I right?"

"Yes, Captain, myself, Sarka and Fiedler."

"Have you got yours?"

"Yes, Captain." He pulled it out.

"Very good, Tarno: now I need to know the whereabouts of those issued to Sarka and Fiedler. Please go and find out. It's important."

"Right, Captain." He went over to the hut and disappeared inside.

"Captain Kirk!" It was Uhura's voice. He whirled round instantly and his heart missed a beat. She was holding a communicator in her hand. He couldn't understand why she wasn't smiling.

"What's the trouble, Lieutenant? You've found it! That's all that matters!"

"I don't know how to tell you, Captain: it's my communicator all right, but it looks like some elephant's done a war dance on it. That brute of a pirate must have put his boot right on top of it. No one'll ever be able to get it back into working order!" She held up a battered object, her face a study in despair.

Kirk had a mad impulse to throw his arms around her and tell her he didn't care if she confessed to having smashed up a dozen communicators. Instead he just looked at her quizzically and remarked,

"Well, Lieutenant, I don't recall the maximum penalty for destroying Starfleet equipment - which, as I am always being reminded from above, is only out on loan! But I won't let them deduct it from your next pay-check. How about a night's token confinement to

barracks in the stockade - after the pirates are safely in the Enterprise brig, of course? Would that satisfy your conscience? Or worst still, a therapy hour with Mr. Spock, who will prove to you by the higher logic that your guilt feelings are due to temporary insanity?"

Uhura dissolved into helpless laughter. "Oh, Captain - you're irresistible when you're threatening people. I'm so glad you're not angry. I guess my nerves are still a little jangled up, that's all. Perhaps I should ask the good doctor if he's got an old-fashioned country pick-me-up in that medikit he carries about all the time!" She beamed at Kirk and sashayed off to join Marinta, who, Chekov not being available, was trying to initiate a little mild flirtation with the coolly amused Sulu.

The good doctor, thought Kirk: *only three possibles left, and he was one...* Giving himself a determined shake, he walked firmly over to where McCoy still crouched by Chekov's side, watching his unconscious patient with an anxious frown.

"I can't do any more for him down here, Jim," he said, looking up as Kirk's shadow fell across them. "I need to get him into Sickbay as soon as you can put your mind to contacting the ship and getting us beamed up. The sooner the better if you don't mind."

Kirk ignored the sarcasm. He took a deep breath and said: "Do you mind showing me your communicator, Doctor?"

McCoy stared at him, his jaw dropping open in patent disbelief; he tried to speak, but no sound came out. Finally he exploded. "Communicator? What the devil do you want with my communicator? Haven't you got one of your own? Isn't there someone else's you could borrow? What are you all of a sudden - some sort of electronics freak? Here's Chekov in serious need of advanced medical attention and your only thought is to go round enquiring about items of Starfleet equipment! Here, take the confounded thing: catch!" And he lobbed the offending object without further warning approximately in Kirk's direction. "Now that I hope you're happy, Captain, when can we expect a little help and service for the sick and dying around here?"

Kirk was opening his mouth in the faint hope that some calming words might occur to him in a flash of inspiration when a presence materialised at his side from nowhere in particular and Spock's voice said:

"I am curious to know, Captain, what those security men are doing, still beating about in the undergrowth in the forest. All the enemy have now been accounted for, I believe. I therefore infer that something of importance has perhaps been lost."

"I'll tell you what they're probably looking for, Spock," said McCoy in a heated tone. "They'll be looking for communicators, no doubt! The Captain here has communicators on the brain. He collects communicators now, Spock! He'll be opening a museum of them soon, I shouldn't wonder. Those men need rest, Jim: they're hurt and some of them have lost blood. The last thing they want is to be forced to take part in a crazy communicator-hunt on a totally uninhabited planet!"

"Bones, Bones!" said Kirk rather wearily when he could get a word in. "Spock! Listen to me, both of you. A communicator was dropped in the middle of the clearing by someone, prior to the

Orions' attack. I saw it but I was too late to retrieve it. I had to find out who that person was. Now I know that whoever it was is dead. When Tarno comes back he will no doubt have a name to give me."

A horrified expression replaced McCoy's scowl as the significance of Kirk's words sank in. He opened his mouth to say something but Kirk had forestalled him. Flipping open McCoy's communicator he spoke into it.

"Kirk to Enterprise. Come in, Enterprise. Do you read me?"

"Scott here, Captain. Is everything all right down there? We were starting to get worried - "

"Quite all right, Mr. Scott, except for Chekov who's had a nasty blow on the head. Doctor McCoy wants to beam up with him right away. As Chekov is unconscious he will have to support him during transit. Please advise Mr. Kyle to prepare the transporter accordingly."

"Understood, Captain. Kyle'll be contacting ye directly. Scott out."

"Now, Doctor. Please get Chekov into a convenient position for beam-up. And don't forget to contact me when you have definite information about his condition."

"Of course, Jim," replied McCoy tartly, heaving his unconscious patient over his shoulder in a sort of fireman's lift. "Always provided my molecules don't get inextricably confused with his on our journey into orbit. Then you might receive a message that even Spock here couldn't unscramble!"

The communicator in Kirk's hand beeped.

"Kyle here, sir. Ready to beam up two persons."

"Right, Mr. Kyle. They're ready. Ener-" In a blur of motion a body hurtled past him, crashed into McCoy sending him and Chekov sprawling, snatched Chekov's phaser from the ground where it had been lying, and still crouching double was dissolved into sparkles and gone before the startled Kirk could move to stop him. As he was gathering his wits an exclamation of surprise burst from the communicator, followed by the sound of a struggle, shouts, and then a high-pitched scream.

"My God, Jim, what was that?" panted McCoy as he staggered back on to his feet. "What the devil's going on up there? I thought I just saw an Orion beamed up or an I going crazy?"

"No, Doctor, you are as sane as the rest of us," said Spock in an indecipherable tone. "We seem to have under-estimated once again the fighting instincts, and the intelligence, of our enemies."

"Obviously," burst out Kirk, "he's been shamming death to fool us - but all the time he was just waiting for a chance to do what damage he could. The opportunity to strike at the ship was too good to be missed."

"Yes, Captain." The tone of regret was unmistakable. "I am much to blame for this. I let my attention be distracted, and the Orions' speed of movement is quite remarkable. I saw him only when

it was too late to intervene."

"Why, welcome to the Human race at last, Mr. Spock," drawled McCoy. "So you admit you're not infallible after all. I never thought I'd live to hear you say it. This opens up a whole new - "

He broke off when he saw that Spock was no longer listening. Kirk had suddenly gripped his First Officer by the arm as if he had difficulty in remaining upright: the colour was beginning to drain out of his face and he staggered where he stood. Spock immediately slipped a supporting arm round his waist and made him sit down on the ground beside Chekov.

"You should have followed my advice, Captain," he said severely. "Why have you not told Doctor McCoy about your wound? You had better let him attend to it at once. I will contact the Enterprise and find out what has happened."

McCoy had Kirk's jacket off in a trice and examined the slash. Kirk gasped in pain. Taking out a hypo the doctor said, "I'm going to put you out for a short while, Jim; there's so much caked blood to remove that it could be an unpleasant experience otherwise." Without waiting for Kirk's protests he pressed the hypo against his shoulder. A few minutes later the Captain was out cold, and McCoy set himself to cleaning up the wound. Then he pulled the edges gently together and got to work with a spray-can of quick-sealing antiseptic foam. As he applied it he mentally thanked Kirk's lucky stars that at least the cut had been straight and clean, not the appalling jagged mess that a Klingon dagger was designed to make. Finally he covered the arm with a pad and soft waterproof bandage, cut Kirk's stiffened tunic sleeve away completely with surgical scissors, and eased his patient back into his outer jacket. Spock, who had been watching while pursuing his long-distance conversation with Scott, now beckoned to Sulu to come over and join them.

"You should both hear this, gentlemen," he said in his unruffled way. "Very fortunately, Mr. Scott was in the Transporter Room when the Orion appeared and fired at Mr. Kyle. After that he turned the phaser on the transporter console, but Mr. Scott and the medical orderlies managed to disarm him without harm to themselves. Then he collapsed and is now under restraint in Sickbay. It is thought unlikely, I am told, that he will live long enough to see the inside of the brig. What we saw must have been one last extraordinary physical effort. Truly remarkable."

"And Kyle?" questioned McCoy impatiently.

"He avoided the phaser beam by ducking down behind the console - a proof of sharp reflexes and considerable presence of mind."

"Well, now I shall have two patients to deal with, if not three," said McCoy fretfully, glancing down at the still unconscious Kirk. He hoisted Chekov up on to his shoulder once more. "Well, Spock, get us up there - don't just stand staring!"

"I regret, Doctor," returned Spock calmly, "that according to Mr. Scott's report, damage to the transporter was extensive: so serious that he estimates it will take forty-eight standard hours to repair."

McCoy put Chekov down again. Then he drew himself up to his full height and stared Spock in the eye.

"In that case, Mr. Spock, I insist that you contact the Enterprise again and get a shuttlecraft sent down for my patient. This poor lad has a right to the ship's medical facilities, and he needs them *yesterday*! If anything happens to him I won't be responsible!"

Spock's eyebrow had shot up. "Doctor, please get a grip on your emotions, and use your considerable intelligence to consider for a moment the impossibility of what you are asking. I cannot take the risk of asking a shuttlecraft pilot to try to find this very small clearing in among the dense and tall forest trees which surround it, or to attempt a landing on such steep and irregular terrain. However, as regards Ensign Chekov's condition, there may be something I can do to help, provided that you will permit me to attempt it."

"I won't have you practising any Vulcan voodoo on my patient, if that's what you've got in mind, Spock - don't you think he's got enough problems?"

"Do not let your love of alliteration led you to lose touch with the truth, Doctor: there is no cult resembling voodoo on Vulcan, as I am sure you know. A brief mind-touch is all I propose. It will tell me the depth of unconsciousness, and how much longer it is likely to last. If the patient is about to recover his senses naturally, it may also facilitate and possibly hasten the process. But if the physician objects, I will of course refrain."

"Oh, all right: I suppose you might as well go ahead. It probably won't do him any harm - or any good, either..." McCoy's tone was grudging, but he got out of the way. Spock knelt down beside Chekov and gently placed his fingers on either side of the Ensign's face. Then he closed his eyes and began to concentrate. For a long time, or so it seemed to McCoy, nothing happened. Finally Spock appeared to relax a little. Then he released his hold on Chekov and looked up.

"Set your mind at rest, Doctor: our young colleague is in no serious danger, I can assure you. His mind is functioning normally at the unconscious level. The regenerative power of Nature has not been idle during his temporary insanity. Rest, inactivity, and your own able ministrations have done all that is necessary. You may confidently expect to see a return of awareness quite soon." He stood up and brushed the dirt off his knees.

"That's as may be, Spock. I'll believe it when I see it."

"Of course, Doctor McCoy; I quite understand that to Humans, ocular proof is the best comfort" - and Spock walked away before McCoy could think of an adequate retort. Sulu, who had been loitering a few yards off, seized this opportunity to approach the Vulcan. His face wore a far from happy expression.

"Mr. Spock, sir - may I speak to you for a moment?"

"Well, Lieutenant?"

Sulu gulped. "I - this is very difficult for me, sir... I don't quite know how to begin - "

"At the beginning, I suggest, Mr. Sulu."

If only he could have talked to the Captain, thought Sulu miserably: it was clear to him that no help was to be forthcoming

from this quarter. But it was too late to back out now.

"What I wanted to say, Mr. Spock - about that Orion pirate who damaged the transporter... It was entirely my fault. When you said you were to blame, I felt dreadful. I reported him dead, and I was mistaken... I was sure he was as dead as all the others, but I realise now I should have given him a second look. The responsibility for what happened belongs to me, sir: I'm the person who's guilty. Anything you say to me is no more than I deserve."

"I accept your honesty, Mr. Sulu. I have nothing to add to what you have already said about yourself. Fortunately no damage was done on board the ship that Mr. Scott cannot repair. I think you have learned a valuable lesson from your oversight. Next time you will be more careful."

He stopped. Sulu waited uncomfortably. The pause lengthened. "Is - is that all, sir? I - I thought..."

"Ah, yes, Mr. Sulu. You thought some kind of punishment was called for - am I right?"

"Well, sir... it would be... what I mean is, I feel - "

"I understand, Mr. Sulu. You are only human. A little... penance... would make you feel better, I believe?"

Sulu looked up at him, in the grip of a sudden wild suspicion. But the dark gaze that met his unwaveringly was quite unfathomable.

"No one is perfect, Lieutenant," pursued Spock. "I have observed that Humans become emotional when this truth is brought home to them by events. Is it because of humility on their part, or arrogance? Consider that question seriously, Mr. Sulu, in the privacy of your own quarters: it is an important step on the road to self-knowledge. I would also recommend that you make time to study with Doctor McCoy the methods of determining when death has occurred: he is the expert, and can guide you. Obviously there will be as many variations as there are races in the Galaxy. I am sure you will have a most interesting time."

He walked away. Sulu moved off, rather thoughtfully, in the other direction, torn, quite unexpectedly, between curiosity, relief, and elation. His thoughts took a new turn however when to his surprise he saw that both the Captain and his friend Pavel were sitting up, quite conscious, one on either side of McCoy, and talking to one another across the good doctor, who was grinning like the proverbial Cheshire cat. He rushed over to them and saluted.

"Captain Kirk! Glad to see you better, sir. May I talk to Chekov, if Doctor McCoy will let me?"

"Of course, Mr. Sulu - but first, tell me: has Tarno come back from the woods yet? There's a matter I have to discuss with him."

"Yes, Captain; he's been waiting to give you his report. I'll send him over."

"Right, Bones," said Kirk; "just give me a hand up, will you? I've got to get back on my feet some time, you know, and it might as well be now." McCoy complied, for once, without demur. When Tarno arrived and saluted, Kirk was already standing waiting for him, with the injured arm secured in a very professional-looking albeit

improvised sling.

"Permission to report, Captain," said Tarno in an expressionless voice.

"Yes, Tarno. I'm sorry you've had to wait. Now please pay close attention. I want you to answer my questions concisely, if possible with just a yes or a no, and to refrain from giving me information I do not specifically request. Is that quite clear?"

"I think so, sir," said Tarno, rather mystified.

"Good. Now then. Am I right to assume that your task in the forest has been completed to your own satisfaction? I mean" - he put up a warning hand - "that you are quite certain that there is nothing more to be found by any further search?"

"Yes, sir."

"So: how many communicators have you brought back?"

"Only one, sir." He held it out. "I'm very sorry, sir."

"Yes, Tarno; so am I. Now, you yourself know whose communicator you were unable to find - just yes or no, Tarno?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you understand that I am not asking for a name at this time?"

"Yes, sir. But I don't understand. That is, I don't understand why not, sir."

"It is something I would prefer not to know until after the funeral ceremony. All your men fought bravely and they will all be accorded the same honours. When we are back on the Enterprise it will be time enough for you to complete your report. Now, we have the painful duty of finding a suitable place for a burial. Do you have any suggestion to make?"

"As a matter of fact, sir, I did take the liberty of going right up to the top of the hill while you were still unconscious. To see if I could get a view. I feel kinda stifled among all these trees. There's an open space up there where I sat down for a breather. You can look right out to sea on the other side, and it's all grassy under your feet, with a little stream, and a craggy ravine dropping away out of sight. It's real pretty - peaceful too, sir."

"Ground suitable for digging, is it? You won't be able to shift rocks."

"Well, we don't have any spades, sir, but I did see a couple of small picks and a mallet in the log hut: must've used 'em for smashing padlocks - that sort of thing. Oh - and some axes too. We'll be able to manage all right, Captain."

"Good. Now, Tarno, you and the small group who *know*, are to say nothing to anyone until you and I have spoken again, on the ship. See to it."

"Yes, Captain."

"Now take as many men as you need up the hill and get started. When you are ready, let me know."

Tarno saluted and moved over to the hut. Kirk strolled across the clearing to where Uhura sat talking to Marinta on the far side. They both looked up and smiled cheerfully as he approached. "Do you feel brave enough to come and have a look at the prisoners now, young lady?" he asked. "There's nothing to be afraid of. I'll stay right with you. Nothing can happen."

"Yes, Captain." She got to her feet and slipped a hand under his uninjured arm.

"That's my brave girl." Kirk walked her over to the stockade. Before they quite reached it Spock joined them unobtrusively and stood on Marinta's other side. The Orions were squatting together in one corner with their heads turned away and their hands dangling idly between their knees. They took no notice of their captors' approach but continued to jabber incomprehensibly to one another in low, growling tones. Marinta stared at them in silence. Kirk spoke to one of the guards.

"Get them on their feet. I want to see their faces."

"Sir." The guard prodded them up with a rough cudgel poked through the wooden poles of the stockade. Snarling horribly, the two pirates glared out at the little group. One of them, when his eyes lighted on Marinta, bared his teeth at her in a frightful grin and launched into an uninterrupted stream of what Kirk supposed were threats or curses; there was, most inappropriately, a thin gleaming metal chain round his swarthy neck, which he seemed to be trying at the same time to flaunt in her face, running his hairy fingers up and down it and shaking the gold locket that hung from it tauntingly from side to side. The other spat derisively in Spock's direction, and pointedly turned his back. Marinta had not flinched, but her face was drawn in lines of such contempt and loathing that Kirk, glancing down at her, had the sudden feeling he was seeing a total stranger.

"Yes, Captain," she said, "I recognise him. That one with the locket and chain. It's mine. It had my parents' picture inside. I couldn't bear to touch it now. Please get it off him - and throw it in the sea." She turned and walked off to where Uhura was still sitting alone by the edge of the trees.

Kirk looked at Spock in mingled astonishment and relief that she had not treated them to a storm of tears or an outburst of hysterical fear in the face of the Orion's terrifying reaction to her presence. He was struck then by a strange rigidity in his First Officer's stance. Spock had not moved: when the Orion had insulted him he had merely turned his head away. But Kirk knew the Vulcan paid a price for his incredible self-control. Invaded by a rush of affection, pity, and fury, which however he had the sense to keep from showing in his face, he said urgently:

"What is it, Spock? Are you all right?"

The Vulcan turned towards him. His face was an unreadable, stony mask.

"Emotions, Captain. All around me. Even you - " he broke off, breathed in sharply, and began again.

"The girl - Marinta: her reaction was considerable, but I

sensed no fear. Rather, an appalling rage. I was taken back by its intensity. Feminine beauty, fragility, child-like spontaneity - these things can be very misleading, Captain. Our inability to use the transporter at this time is most regrettable. Since we cannot remove the Orions from this planet for at least two days, I would advise leaving a strong guard over them and removing the rest of the landing party to different and more agreeable surroundings."

"Yes, Spock. You're right, as always. Somewhere with no unpleasant associations. What about the beach? The cleansing power of water does wonders for the mind as well as the body. We will tow the pirate craft right out to deeper water and scuttle it - there are some strong swimmers in Security who will be only too glad of the opportunity to indulge themselves a little, and we might as well all make the best of our two days' enforced leisure. This is, after all, a remarkably beautiful world."

* * * * *

CHAPTER FIVE

The burial service held for the six security men was a brief, simple affair. Their bodies had been carried up the hill by their surviving colleagues, with whom Sulu made a sixth in token of official respect, and laid gently side by side in the heart of the sweet-smelling, newly-turned virgin soil of the planet. Kirk thought privately that it would be difficult to imagine a lovelier or more peaceful spot for anyone's last resting-place. He read out the six names, slowly, adding the citations and honours which belonged to each, and spoke a few words of commendation and farewell in the name of all with whom they had served on board the Enterprise, carefully avoiding any mention of the immediate events which had led to their deaths. Finally he moved to the tall, rough marker stone, which had been spilt off by phaser fire from a nearby outcrop of rock and set up at the head of the grave.

"I dedicate this stone, and this spot, to the memory of these six members of Starfleet, our comrades, who gave their lives in the performance of their duty. May their rest be forever undisturbed."

A low murmur of acquiescence from those standing at attention round the grave was followed by a moment's silence. Then Kirk bent down, scooped up a handful of earth and gently scattered it over the bodies of his dead crewmen. As he walked steadily away down into the trees, his officers, one by one, copied him, leaving Security to fill in the hole and replace the turf. Kirk had agreed with Tarno that the place should be made to look as untouched and beautiful as it had been before, insofar as this was possible.

"Now, what do you propose to do about the dead Orions, Jim?" asked McCoy as they came in sight of the clearing once more. "I don't think further delay in disposing of the bodies is advisable. You could pile them all into their own craft and scuttle them along with it, I suppose - or better still, blow them and it sky-high!"

"No, Bones! Have a little concern for the native inhabitants of this ocean! We haven't had a chance to explore it yet, but those waters are almost certainly teeming with life. No, I propose to use the cleanest way: fire. We'll leave them where they are in the log hut, get all the filth and rubbish inside, and fill up the spaces with brushwood. All the unused logs and broken branches can be piled around the outside, and one burst of phaser fire will do the rest. That loathsome stockade can be burned later when we've got those two

safely behind a force-field in the Enterprise brig, and the whole clearing scorched clean and purified of every trace of those monsters' activities. We'll leave the ground under a layer of ash to help fertilise it and protect the new plant life when it springs up. I don't want any sign left of all the killing that has gone on here."

Kirk then turned to Chekov who, though still rather pale, looked quite recovered from the effects of his head wound - apart from the fact that he was proudly sporting a large piece of sticking plaster with which the doctor had covered the new and tender scar tissue to protect it against further possible accidental knocks. "Primitive but practical, Pavel," he had said. "Good enough for the Garden of Eden, I guess. Now try not to run into any more trouble - that piece of plaster was my last!" Kirk felt considerably cheered by his young office's recovery and newly regained joie de vivre: he knew just how to turn them to the best advantage.

"Ensign! How does escort duty of two ladies down to the beach strike you? You can test the temperature of the water in advance for the rest of us."

"Aren't you coming down yet, then, sir?" asked Chekov, his voice almost drowned by wild exclamations of delight from Marinta, who had grabbed Uhura's hand and was attempting to drag her off down to the water there and then.

"I think Security will need help here until the fire is well and truly going. There are only five of them now and they've worked hard today already. Mr. Spock, Mr. Sulu and myself will give them a hand - and Doctor McCoy, of course: unless you would rather accompany the beach party, Bones?"

"No, Jim, I'll stay here: I want to get this place thoroughly sanitised as much as you do," replied McCoy. "The beach won't run away, I dare say."

While Spock supervised the work in the clearing, and lent his not inconsiderable strength to the task of carting logs and branches to the hut, Kirk contacted Scott on the Enterprise for an update on the transporter repairs, but all Scott would say was that they were progressing slowly, and that he could not promise results before the time already estimated. Kirk therefore 'borrowed' Sulu and they hurried down to the shore and waded out to the Orion vessel in search of provisions. They were rewarded with quite a haul.

"Well, Mr. Sulu, I never thought I should bless the pirates for their greed," remarked Kirk as together they manhandled food containers of various shapes and sizes out of the ship and through the thigh-deep water up on to the beach, "but I must confess that this hoard is going to improve the quality of life for all of us during the next twenty-four hours."

Sulu's teeth flashed back at him. "I can't wait to tell Mr. Spock that even greed has a silver lining, Captain," he said innocently.

"At your own risk and peril, Sulu," Kirk grinned in return. "I warn you - his logic will make mincemeat of you! Is it worth it?"

"Well worth it, Captain!" replied Sulu. He was about to elaborate when they both smelt burning. A thick column of black smoke was rising into the sky above their heads.

"Come and watch the bonfire, Lieutenant," said Kirk. "That is one thing I want to see."

"Me too, sir," agreed Sulu, and they climbed back up the slope to the scene of the blaze. When they got there the flames were leaping up into the still air; the burning wood crackled, and spat out bubbling resin and grease in all directions. The heat soon grew so intense that it was impossible to stay near, and dancing waves of haze made the trees appear to waver and tremble in the background. The Enterprise people stood and watched the destruction in silence, a certain grim satisfaction etched on their smoke-begrimed faces. When it was all over and the cooling ash had been raked over the ground, two guards were posted again on the prisoners, and then Kirk and Spock followed everyone else down to the new bivouac site on the shore. Here Kirk felt impelled to make a very short speech.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he said, collecting their attention with a circular sweep of his good arm (he really was a little light-headed from fatigue). "My friends! If you still have inhibitions, prepare to shed them now. We are all filthy: here is the sea. What are we waiting for?"

The whole party immediately took him at his word, and ran, waded or plunged in various stages of undress into the welcoming waves. It was sheer, instant bliss.

The cool water acted like a blessing on their tired bodies, washing the dirt and sweat from their skins as it relieved and soothed away the nervous tension and the emotional residue of the day's disasters. Its mineral content seemed to be much the same as that of Earth's oceans, stimulating and exhilarating and finally awakening a ravenous hunger. The sight of the pirates' food stores neatly piled up on the beach provoked tremendous enthusiasm, and while the best swimmers towed the now empty craft further out and sank it, the others prepared a meal against their return and arranged a comfortable bivouac for the night.

Food was of course taken up to the guards and their prisoners in the stockade. The latter were uncommonly subdued, for they had had a bad fright when the log hut was set alight. Convinced that they were about to be burned alive with it, they had fallen on their knees, wrung their hands and shed piteous tears - thereby infuriating Security, who were disgusted by their sudden change of tune when they thought their own precious hides were in danger, and livid at being credited with the same cruel instincts as those of these wretches they were having to guard. Such fear spoke volumes about the treatment inflicted by Orions on their enemies or their victims, and probably, thought the guards, when the price was right and the opportunity offered itself, on each other.

After the meal was over, Kirk divided up his depleted party into watches for the night. The prisoners could not be left unguarded: they constituted in fact the only danger, now, that might threaten his own people's security. It took all his self-control not to raise the Enterprise yet again to badger Scott about the transporter situation; he would not be really easy in his mind until those undesirable aliens were safely off the planet. When all the chores were done and the party was reclining drowsily on the sand, he thought how nice it would have been if someone had brought a miniature chess set down; a game would have occupied his mind and kept him from worrying impatiently about things that could no be helped. But he knew better than to say this aloud: Spock would probably have set off at once along the beach looking for black and

white pebbles and a stick with which to draw squares on the sand... Well, maybe they could do that tomorrow, when he felt more energetic...

When Kirk awoke next morning to blinding sunlight, he saw that neither Spock nor McCoy was in camp. Like them, he had taken his turn of guard duty at the stockade during the night, and in his case it had had its usual effect - he had overslept. Sounds of laughter and splashing came to his ears from close at hand, where one pale green and three dark heads bobbed about in the sparkling water. *This temptation I shall succumb to*, thought Kirk; his injured arm felt fine and he spared a warm thought for Bones: how many times had he had cause to bless his friend's professional skill? he had quite lost count. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes he threw off everything but his briefs, ran down the beach and plunged in.

McCoy on the other hand had slept badly. Waking for the fourth or fifth time to find that it was now dawn, he had finally given up the attempt and decided to take a stroll uphill. Perhaps exercise would solve his problem. He tip-toed quietly past Kirk who was fast asleep, and noted that the place near him where Spock had been lying was now deserted. Wishing, not for the first time, that he had Spock's stamina and ability to be wide awake whenever events called for it, he wandered along the shore a little way and coming on a narrow trail winding up through the trees, resolved to see where it would lead him.

The forest was eerily silent. McCoy could hear nothing but his own footfalls, muffled by the moss and fallen needles on which he was treading. He wondered how long it would be before the wild creatures began to creep back to their old haunts. How long would it take then to realise that the destructive outsiders who had driven them away from their nests and their holes had gone for good? *A year would probably see them all return*, he thought hopefully, with a lightening of the heart, remembering how expert nature was at healing wounds when she was given the chance.

As he continued to trudge doggedly and rhythmically uphill, the solitude wrapped him around, and the pure resin-filled air cleansed his lungs and delighted his nostrils with its wholesome, invigorating smell. When finally he saw a brighter light striking through the trees ahead, and then emerged into the warm sunshine to stand on the summit of a small crag which projected over the sea like a sort of natural belvedere, McCoy already felt much more at peace with himself, and the uneasy dreams that had come back to plague him during the night had dissolved into mere wisps and cobwebs in the furthest corners of his brain.

As he gazed around at all the pristine beauty spread out below him, the doctor realised that from his excellent advantage point he could look straight down on to the open grassy stretch above the trees where the bodies of those killed in the fighting had been buried the day before. The grey stone marker stood out clearly against its leafy green background. Beyond it a little rocky eminence rose out of a clump of low shrub-like vegetation, starred with what must be yellow and white flowers. McCoy suddenly saw, with a start, that he was not alone in the landscape. There was a motionless figure, sitting or kneeling, he could not tell which, on the top of the highest rock - a black silhouette against a sky

flooded with golden light. The dark head, slightly bowed over the interlaced hands, was turned towards the sea. *It was, thought McCoy, obviously an ideal spot for meditation, Vulcan or otherwise.* Then words, learned long ago and long believed forgotten, surfacing without warning, came unbidden into his mind.

"Nymph, in thy orisons
Be all my sins remembered..."

Not exactly appropriate!... so why, just now, had he no desire to laugh? Well, McCoy reflected, withdrawing stealthily into the camouflage of the trees, that was what came of mis-spending part of your youth mugging up old tragedies on the strength of some ancient culture-vulture's recommendation... But the nagging question remained to torment him as he walked sombrely back down hill through the forest. What was a Vulcan - more precisely, what was this particular Vulcan - that one would feel the impulse to turn to him for understanding - for absolution even - of one's past mistakes, or one's present failings? For McCoy was well aware that his nightmares were born of guilt feelings that he still could not subdue, and memories of a personal disaster he had tried long and unsuccessfully to bury in oblivion.

The morning was spent by everyone, even Spock, in pleasant relaxation, apart from the recurrent chore of guard duty. No one seemed to want to stray very far from the water's edge. Finding a log or two in the neighbourhood of the clearing that had unaccountably escaped Spock's eagle eye, Sulu and Chekov pushed them down to the sea and lashed them together to make a very small and narrow raft, which they floated out and proceeded to fish from with improvised rods and lines, Sulu perched at one end, Chekov astride the other. As the slightest rash movement from one tended to unhorse his companion, and the precarious nature of their home-made craft was not lost for long on Uhura and Marinta, more time was spent falling off and trying to scramble back on board than in the pursuit of piscatorial success. At last Kirk decreed that one dedicated fisherman was worth four frivolous holiday-makers, and Chekov was left in peace, along on his logs, to get on with it. Soon he began to have the most incredible luck. The sea was full of living creatures, as Kirk had surmised, and when the young man came ashore proudly swinging a cluster of silvery and rainbow-hued fish he was met with a storm of applause from his hungry shipmates.

Kirk had already got a small fire going, with some unselfish help from Spock. The latter's strict Vulcan principles would not stretch to fish-eating, Kirk knew; luckily, they had found a small supply of preserved vegetables in one of the boxes salvaged from the Orion ship. He himself could not resist the taste of the smell of freshly-caught grilled fish: Spock would simply have to take his dinner up-wind!

"Now," he said, still in an organising mood. "Who's going to cook what Ensign Chekov and Mother Nature between them have provided?"

"I'll do that, Captain," said Uhura quickly (she knew what Sulu's and Chekov's best efforts in that line were like) - "provided I don't have to clean them first, that is!" ("Coward!" said a little voice in her brain. "What price your savage ancestors now?" She pretended not to hear it.) To McCoy's horror, every head turned expectantly in his direction.

"N-now look here," he began, backing away, but Kirk seized him by the arm.

"You have the best tools for the job, Bones," he said persuasively, "and as Spock and myself can testify from personal experience, your surgical skill is more than adequate -" here Spock raised a questioning eyebrow ever so slightly - "and as you are not going to get away with a show of squeamishness at the sight of mere blood and guts, the sooner you get it over with, the sooner we shall eat."

McCoy reluctantly opened his medikit and took out the biggest scalpel it contained. It went much against the grain with him to turn a fine-edged instrument like this to coarse culinary purposes, but he was so overwhelmingly outvoted that there was no escape.

"Very well," he said, rolling up his tunic sleeves. "I shall give you all a short but comprehensive lecture on the anatomical structure and physiological functions of fish, to accompany my demonstration of the best technique for dissecting them."

The beach emptied as if by magic. He looked around: the water was full of people. Only Spock was left, gazing at him with an unreadable expression.

"It is unnerving, Doctor," he remarked, "to find myself for once in agreement with your illogical and emotional attitudes. My reasons are of course purely logical; Vulcans are taught in childhood to respect all living creatures, and to recoil from taking life in any but the more exceptional circumstances."

"Oh, yes?" snarled McCoy, already up to the elbows in fish entrails. "Haven't you rather conveniently left the vegetable kingdom out of your philosophy? Aren't cabbages and parsnips alive? I'd like to see your face if a lettuce leaf on your plate were to scream in horror at you. You'd probably have to starve!"

"Do control your gut reactions, Doctor," murmured Spock neatly avoiding a stream of fish trimmings which landed in the sand not too far from his boots. "Why must you always espouse such extreme views? Your own ancient philosophers recommended a middle way, as I recall."

"Heavens, Spock! That was all of five thousand years ago!" protested McCoy. The next moment he could have bitten his tongue off. His loose ball was at once smashed out of court.

"Indeed, Doctor. Human nature seems to have improved since their day hardly at all."

"There is also a saying, Spock," put in Kirk, who had just come up from the water, "that men learn only one thing from history, which is, that they never learn from it. Do hurry up, Bones: I need you to change this dressing for me. It seems to have lost its waterproofing entirely."

"You did go in for total immersion sooner than I would have advised, Jim," retorted McCoy. "It's lucky for you I brought plenty of dressings with me. Just let me go and get this muck washed off in the sea, and my clinic will be open for business."

The smell of cooking fish repopulated the beach with amazing speed. Spock removed himself to a safe distance; the rest were soon

in a position to express their admiration of Uhura's skill, and after the meal lay flat on the sand with varying expressions of ecstatic satisfaction on their faces. Spock wandered back and sat down next to Kirk and McCoy and all three gazed reflectively out to sea, each following his train of thought in companionable silence. Finally Kirk said,

"I must say, Bones, it's a pleasure to see our young visitor eat with such relish. At least there seems to be nothing wrong with her appetite."

"Well, she's still a growing girl, Jim. And then her inside's reasonably normal - not all at sixes and sevens like Spock's here."

Spock sat bolt upright. "Captain!" he said severely. "I have grown accustomed to the Doctor's personal insults over the years, but when it comes to his violating the laws of simple arithmetic, I think an outside opinion is called for. It might be of help in finding a suitable treatment for his case."

McCoy turned to Kirk in mock despair. "When are we going to get him that dictionary of Earth idioms you're always talking about, Jim? It's time you took on the job of educating this literal-minded Vulcan into an appreciation of the picturesque in everyday speech." He got to his feet lazily and added, "I feel like a little solitary exploration. Who knows? This planet may provide some useful additions to the Galactic materia medica. See you all later!"

"What are you doing to him, Spock?" said Kirk curiously. "He's even beginning to sound like you. Long words... abstractions... foreign phrases? It must be catching."

"I am sure you are well aware, Jim," said Spock drily, "that whatever, for reasons I cannot fathom, he would have us believe, the doctor is -" he hesitated for a moment - "no slouch, I believe the term is, when it comes to matters of scientific or philosophical interest." He stood up. "Perhaps you would not object if I also took advantage of our unique situation here to pursue some scientific investigations of my own? I believe the geological features of this land-mass may prove quite fascinating." Without really waiting for an answer, he strode off in the opposite direction to that recently taken by McCoy.

The doctor did not expect to find much of interest in the forest itself, which on this side of the ridge was relatively sunless and devoid of undergrowth. His real objective was the meadow area above, and to a lesser extent the woodland fringes beyond. But his most interesting finds proved to be certain very small plants growing among the rocks at the foot of a rising crag whose grooved and weathered face was home to patches of lichen and clumps of fern. The silver trickles of water with which it was streaked met lower down to form a little rill which dropped out of sight in chuckling and babbling cascades. But all McCoy could glimpse when he peered downwards was a small semi-circular beach of pure white sand a long way below. The sight of endless miles of blue ocean stretching away to the horizon, and the faint enticing sound of hidden water running somewhere closer at hand, made him suddenly aware of a raging thirst, so he set to work to see if he could discover the invisible stream.

It proved of course to be harder than he had imagined, but eventually he traced the elusive purling and tinkling noises to a

cleft in the side of the crag. There it was - a little spout of water, gurgling out from some dark and mysterious depth within the cleft. McCoy cupped his hands and drank from it greedily. It was sweet and icy cold. He thought he had never tasted anything so delicious. When he had drunk his fill he splashed his hot face and ran dripping hands through his hair and round the back of his neck, shivering with delight as the cold trickles ran down his back. Then he shook himself much as a dog might, and gazed anew at the enchanting scene that surrounded him.

The afternoon heat lay over everything like a shimmering veil. The sky was flecked high up and a long way off with a few small white clouds. The silence... the silence was like the hush before the dawn of creation. He had never heard such exquisite silence. He felt his eyes sting suddenly with unaccustomed tears. He let them come: only wiping them away when they blurred his vision completely. He was totally alone - and yet he felt deeply at one with this beautiful world, absorbed into it, his pulse beating in time with the slow respirations of the spirit which informed this unique place, this unique moment.

It was when he stooped for another drink before undertaking an exploratory walk back along by the cliff edge that his eye registered the presence of some ferny fronds projecting a couple of feet above the water-spout. It was not a plant his memory could immediately classify. He put up a hand and touched the leaves, feeling back along their stems for a root, but their point of attachment was out of reach, somewhere within the cleft. He now examined it more closely, to see how deep it was, and whether he could possibly squeeze inside to get a better look. Below waist height it certainly looked wide enough to admit a human body. As he hesitated he thought he saw a glimmer of light in its depths, so screwing up his courage he dropped to his knees and crawled through the low rocky entrance.

To his surprise he emerged in a cave of very respectable dimensions, in which it was easily possible to stand upright, and swing any number of cats if one felt so inclined. He looked round, confidently expecting to find a slit in the opposite rock wall through which the gleam of light must have come. But then he realised that he had been mistaken: the walls all round were unbreached, and it was the light from the entrance that was reflected back from their rough and glinting surfaces. As he looked at them, with only mild curiosity at first, he gradually realised, in growing consternation, what it was that he had stumbled upon without meaning to.

Sitting down heavily on the ground, he buried his face in his hands and gave way to the gloomiest of forebodings. He knew only too well what the consequences of his discovery could be, and the thought was quite intolerable. There was a leaden weight in his chest where his heart ought to be. His duty as a Starfleet officer was plain, but his whole heart and soul cried out against following that easy path. Getting to his feet again he began to pace up and down in the confined space, cursing under his breath, or breaking out into angry or despairing exclamations, as if some spirit of the place could hear him and be thereby induced to respond.

He wondered ironically what Spock would do if he had found himself here, at the parting of the ways. Close his eyes to everything but the dictates of logic, no doubt... McCoy stopped dead and struck the unfeeling wall with his fist, so hard that he tore the skin from his knuckles and blood began to well up and run down the back of his hand. But he scarcely noticed the pain, for a decision was forming in his soul. Logic demanded, did it not, that the lesser

of two evils be chosen, and he was not really in any doubt as to which that was. Between the chance of prevention and the certainty of a tragic outcome he could hesitate no longer: he must make the choice his conscience was forcing on him, or it would never let him rest.

He glanced round one last time - then stooped and crawled out of the cave into the bright sunshine. His hand was bleeding rather freely now so he held it under the little gush of icy water until the wound was staunch; then he treated himself to a last refreshing draught, and walked away with the light step of one who has just decided the fate of a world.

Kirk sat by himself in the sunshine on the rocky outcrop above the shore bivouac, staring dreamily at the water and basking like a lizard in the heat. How rarely did he and his crew get such an opportunity to breathe natural air, feel real sunlight on their skins, swim in a salt ocean that was the produce of billions of years of planetary change - and there they could also delight their eyes and hearts with the beauty of birds and flowers and fish never seen before by any other intelligent beings (he did not include the pirates in that category for it was clear that they did not have the intelligence to see).

Although the Enterprise held a unique place in his affections, it was undeniable that the artificial world of any interplanetary vessel, be she the most beautiful Starship ever designed by Man, was not an ideal environment over long periods of time for people whose ancestors had evolved beneath the open skies of a planet. He thought what a remarkable bunch his officers and crew were, and how much they deserved these moments of happiness and relaxation that had come their way.

He also thought that after his next stint of guard duty was over he would go down to the shore and have another swim. Perhaps Chekov and Sulu would even consent to lend him their raft. His arm was getting better all the time; obviously the waters of this ocean must have valuable healing powers. Then he heard light footsteps coming down the hill towards him. He did not look round, knowing very well whose they were. A tall shadow fell across him, and its owner dropped gracefully to a sitting position on the rock at his side. Kirk smiled at the sea.

"Spock," he said in a tone of utter contentment.

"Jim," responded the Vulcan quietly.

No further words were exchanged between them, for none were needed.

"Pavel," said Marinta, "why don't you take me exploring for a little while? I would like to find out what's on the other side of this mountain." She gestured rather petulantly towards the tree-clad hillside. "It's a bit boring here - nowhere to go but just up the beach or down the beach, and I'm tired of swimming, aren't you?" She looked up at him with a winning smile. "Do say yes!"

Chekov hesitated - but only for a fraction of a second. He loved swimming, and boating, and fishing, in fact all the delights

that the sea had to offer. The idea had already occurred to him, several times, that he would be perfectly happy to spend the rest of his life on this beach, in and out of the water, or messing about with a raft. On the other hand, here was the chance which he had been hoping for weeks might come along one day. *This smashing girl with the incredible eyes was actually begging him to take her off, just the two of them, on a trip of adventurous exploration* - "stroll in the woods" was too tame an expression for Pavel's romantic imagination. *Sulu and Uhura were very tactful, most of the time, but they were always around!* Now he had only to say yes, and he and Marinta would be alone together at last, walking hand in hand, or - his mind took an audacious leap into the near future - with their arms round each other's waists, through the concealing trees to the high meadows where nobody had ever been, and they would stand side by side and gaze out over blissfully empty ocean. And then he would look into her eyes and tell her how he felt about her, and then -

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I'd love to take you, Marinta. Shall we start right away?" She clapped her hands, bent down and picked up the rather elderly combat jacket that Uhura had lent her to wear on this expedition, and slung it over her shoulder.

"You won't need to drag that old thing round with you, surely?" said Uhura. "You'll be boiled alive in this heat!"

"Oh, I think it'll be quite chilly in the shade of the trees," Marinta said. She slipped a hand confidently into Chekov's. "You'll keep close to me while we're in the forest, won't you, Pavel? and not take me anywhere near that horrid stockade? I'm terrified at the thought of those monsters still being up there." She gave a small sob.

"Of course I'll look after you," Chekov promised. "The Captain entrusted your safety to me, remember?" He turned to the others. "You don't mind, do you? We shan't be all that long - just an hour or two, probably."

"Oh, take as long as you like, Pavel, old son," replied Sulu, giving Uhura a conspiratorial wink. "We'll be quite happy to do nothing down here without you. In fact, I might even save you the fishing chore this evening: the fish seem to be a push-over round here. I bet you I can come up with a bigger and better catch than you if I put my mind to it!"

"You're on, Hikaru!" retorted Chekov happily. "Come along, Marinta!" He gave her hand a tug and they set off at a run up the hill through the trees, Chekov leading the way.

"Fish two meals running?" said Uhura. "Oh, Hikaru, *must* you?"

"Captain Kirk adores fish, Nyota - you know that! This may be his last chance if our Chief Engineer delivers the goods as promised - and he probably will. Come out with me and paddle the raft: you can watch me work away at catching supper!" He dashed off into the waves to get it, leaving her speechless for the second time in as many days.

Kirk and Spock still sat on their rocky eyrie above the sea. Kirk had been awakened out of a light doze by the beep of a communicator, and then the low tones of his First Officer replying. Scott had good news for them; the transporter repairs were almost

completed, and the landing party could probably be beamed back to the ship before nightfall, if that was what the Captain wanted. He would contact Kirk again when everything was in order and the final safety checks had been run. Kirk knew he should have been delighted. Instead, his spirits took an inexplicable dive. A sigh escaped him in spite of himself, wrenched up, or so it felt to him, from the innermost depths of his being.

"What is troubling you, Jim?"

Kirk looked up, startled, and made a mildly surprising discovery. The sun had moved round and was shining directly into their faces. In its light he saw quite clearly that Spock's eyes were not black as he had always supposed, but a warm, deep brown. Now why had he never noticed that before? But more important, their expression was one of undisguised, tender concern. He spoke hastily to put his friend's mind at rest.

"Nothing really, Spock. There's a report I shall have to write, that I'm not looking forward to... Oh, it's just shades of the prison-house closing in, I suppose..." He pulled himself up suddenly. "What am I saying, for heaven's sake? There *must* be something wrong with me - I've never thought of the Enterprise as a prison-house before. You know, there's something about this planet..."

His voice trailed off. How could anyone understand what he felt when he could not explain it to himself? And he did not feel up to trying to explain to Spock what the shades of the prison-house were, not right now...

"'Heaven lies about us in our infancy'..." The voice at his side, quoting Wordsworth with the casual ease of someone repeating the remarks of a friend, effortlessly took up Kirk's thought, answering the question he had not begun to be able to formulate for himself. "Doctor McCoy called Talasson the Garden of Eden, did he not? But, for good or evil, we have left our infancy behind. Tempting though the prospect may occasionally be, we cannot really go back to it without risking the loss of ourselves - of what life by its challenges has helped us to become."

His eyes rested for a moment affectionately on Kirk's face, with warmth and reassurance in their depths. "A young race will one day people this beautiful world, which we have been privileged only to visit for a very brief moment. We have restored its peace, and it is time now for us to return to the life which is properly ours."

Kirk was silent for a while, turning Spock's words over in his mind. How had the Vulcan read his alien mood so well? How had he found the words that could help him to reconcile his conflicting impulses by understanding their cause? His friend never ceased to amaze him, not least by *being* his friend; dangers and difficulties served only to strengthen their bond. He sighed again, less distressfully this time, and said,

"I know you are right, Spock... I know in my heart that this is no place for us, and yet - another part of me longs desperately to stay. Help me to put myself together again, my friend, as you did once before: tell me who I am. Make me believe that things will be again as they used to be."

"I recommend the observation deck of the Enterprise, Jim," returned Spock. He fixed Kirk with an intense, almost mystical

gaze. "Go up there and look into the depths of space. There is nothing to be afraid of. You will be your own man again, *Captain*, when you see the stars.

Tarno and his colleague, Mo-hal, on duty at the stockade, were counting the hours that still separated them from the blessed moment when the transporter would be working again and they could get their prisoners transferred to the ship and safely behind a force-field in the brig. It was depressing in the clearing; they could not see the sea because the trees got in the way; and they were getting deathly bored.

Their two-hour stint seemed to have lasted twice that length already, although it was still only half over. Even the prisoners were bored. They had long since got tired of hurling insults at whoever was guarding them, and now spent their time squatting morosely in opposite corners of their pen. Tarno had to admit that his superior officers had done more than their share of duty, often in partnership with himself or one of his colleagues, and a lot of time had been whiled away quite pleasantly in interesting conversation. The situation was nobody's fault. He just felt naturally irritable today at having nothing of real interest to do.

To avoid inflicting his mood on Mo-hal he had strolled off to the very edge of the clearing - in fact, a little beyond, for since the fire it had been almost impossible to find anything to sit on when you needed to take the weight off your feet for a little while. Sitting on the ground was out - not in front of the prisoners. It would be quite unacceptably undignified.

From his cushion of moss between the giant roots of an ancient tree he could still see the stockade. Glancing over his shoulder, he grinned at the sight of Mo-hal striding regularly up and down in front of it as if there was no tomorrow. A dedicated jogger, that one, liable to be met with pounding the corridors of the Enterprise or timing himself round and round the gym, at hours when more normal folk were still snoring in their bunks. He had seen photo-cube pictures of Mo-hal's family from time to time, and quite understood the lad's almost compulsive need for exercise. It was psychological, in Tarno's opinion. Mo-hal was quite a good-looking boy, but haunted by the fear of running to fat in later life like his father and grandfather before him. *Well, good luck to him*, thought Tarno, leaning back luxuriously against his tree.

McCoy was wandering back to camp along the beach, feeling somewhat tired. He could see Uhura and Sulu sitting side by side on the raft with their legs dangling in the water, one pair to port, the other to starboard to keep the ungainly thing trimmed. He could even hear the low murmur of their voices. His knuckles had started to bleed again and bits of earth were sticking to the wound where he had slipped and fallen on it while making his way downhill. He waded out up to his knees and washed off the dirt, catching his breath with a hiss as the salty water bit and stung. Well, every good treatment should hurt a little: he would stake his life, not to mention his reputation, on the antiseptic properties of the unpolluted ocean. Come to think of it, he might even bottle some...

As he made his way towards the camp to find a dressing for the injury, he saw Spock come striding down the hill alone and advance to

meet him.

"Did you have a productive walk, Doctor?" Spock began. Then he caught sight of the traces of blood on McCoy's hand and stopped short. "I see it was a not uneventful one. You seem to have met with a slight accident. The knuckles are not broken, I trust?"

McCoy looked up in surprise at this unexpected display of concern for his welfare just in time to see a peculiar expression in the Vulcan's eyes being rapidly suppressed.

"No, no, Spock, it's nothing - just fell on a tree-root and barked the skin off, that's all." It was only a half lie, and all the more convincing for that, he hoped. "I'm just going to put on a temporary dressing to keep it clean."

"You will find that difficult to do one-handed, Doctor," observed Spock. "Let me." He took the dressing from McCoy's unresisting fingers and deftly applied it to the back of the injured hand. "If I may presume to offer some advice, I think you should disinfect it again, more... reliably, shall we say, when we get back to the ship. There seem to be minute particles of some mineral substance adhering to the inside of the torn skin."

He paused. McCoy said nothing.

"I came to tell you that Mr. Scott has just informed the Captain that the transporter is again in working order, so I infer that our return to more normal conditions of duty cannot be long delayed. The Captain - "

A dreadful scream tore the still air somewhere above their heads. Then there was another, followed by horrified shouts, at once engulfed in peals of high-pitched hysterical laughter. The laughter went on and on, till it ended abruptly in a choking gurgle. The two officers were shocked into immobility for a moment or two. Then, recovering themselves, without a word spoken, they ran for the trees.

Tarno was miles away, thinking of home. He only came out of his reverie when he heard voices in the clearing. Most unusual! one of them sounded like a girl. He craned his head round and saw that he was not imagining things: it was a girl - that pretty alien - Xorian, wasn't she? - that they'd picked up adrift several weeks ago; the one young Chekov seemed to stuck on... What was her name again? Marinda, or some such thing... He thought she was quite a tasty dish, himself; pity about the green hair, though. Now if it had been Mr. Spock who had taken a fancy to her... anyway, what was she doing here, he wondered vaguely, not really willing to move from his comfortable squat.

It soon became clear of course what the forward little piece was doing there - she was making up to Mo-hal, God save the mark! Smiling up at him through her lashes, with those weird eyes, chattering away nineteen to the dozen, fingering the braid on his uniform sleeve, and all the time casting sideways glances into the stockade as if to see what effect she was having on the prisoners. Tarno began to feel rather disgusted: what did she want with them for heaven's sake: wasn't one man at a time enough for her? he couldn't help grinning to himself though - she had that poor sap of a Mo-hal completely mesmerised, that was for sure. As he watched, things really began to hot up: Marinta had taken Mo-hal by the

lapels of his jacket and pulled his head down to hers, and now Mo-hal had both arms around her and they were kissing passionately, right in front of those damned pirates. Tarno began to feel it was about time he called a halt to all this. After all, he happened to know that Mo-hal had a nice little fiancée somewhere back on Earth; he didn't want any man under his command passing on goodness knows what unpleasant foreign disease to his trusting future wife.

Marinta was trembling with barely controllable excitement. She was approaching the edge, she knew, but she must keep her head just a few seconds longer... Mo-hal was crushing her mouth, making it difficult for her to breathe... Very slowly her left hand crept caressingly down his side, groping under the open combat jacket - where was it? He must not be distracted or his suspicions would be aroused... ah! Her fingers encountered a hard object, and closed round it triumphantly. Stealthily they drew it from its holster on Mo-hal's belt. Then she broke free, gave him a staggering push that sent him headlong, and whirled round to face the stockade, the muzzle of the phaser already trained on her helpless victims. A cry of exultant hate burst from her throat as she pushed the phaser button to full power and fired. A shriek of agony answered her. Where the Orion had been a second before, there was now nothing but a heap of steaming ash. As the other opened his mouth in terror to scream for help, she fired again. A second coil of smoke hissed up from the glowing ground. All happened so fast that Tarno had only just risen to his feet. As he exploded into action the phaser was turned in his direction and he only just had time to roll sideways into a thornbush out of the way of the searing beam of heat. He saw Mo-hal fling his arms round the demented girl from behind and try to wrestle the weapon away from her. In a flash she had twisted like a panther out of his grasp and smashed the phaser butt into his face: the next instant something gleamed in her right hand, rose, and was buried with unbelievable force in the young man's chest. He fell heavily at her feet and lay still.

As Tarno picked himself up Marinta began to laugh. The sound froze him where he stood. Low and gloating at first, it soon echoed, peal after triumphant peal, all round the clearing. She was free to exult now, to throw off her pretence of inoffensive innocence, to scream and shout and give vent at last to her horror, her fury, her grief, and her satisfaction at the sight of these heaps of still-smoking cinders which had paid the price of her parents' horrible end. Hot, hot and sweet, oh, so sweet, was her revenge! The laughter had her in its grip now, as she finally let go all restraint. Something in her head was urging her on, did not want her to stop. Her head was aching, throbbing, like her throat: tears rolled down her cheeks, but still she screamed. She must stop this awful screaming soon, she thought wildly, or it would drive her mad. But there was someone inside her chest, *trying* to drive her nearer and nearer the edge of madness... With one last desperate shriek she gripped the knife handle and drove the blade savagely in and across the gasping throat of that someone: that should si-

As she collapsed to the ground in a last choking convulsion, the ringing in Tarno's ears eased, and recovering the use of his wits and his legs, he rushed over to the stockade. But it was too late. As he stared down, numb with shock, at the pool of blood and the limp body lying in it, the Captain burst into the clearing.

"What's going on here, Tarno? - Good God! - " He fell on his knees beside the motionless girl, lifted her wrist, then her head,



with an expression of dawning horror. The strange eyes stared past him, seeing nothing: they were pink and grey, flecked with fiery lights, but glazing rapidly, like the eyes of a dying animal Kirk had once found in a steel trap. Before he had time to speak or look around, first Spock and then McCoy arrived panting, and hurried over to where he knelt. Spock's first instinct was to block McCoy's way so that he could not see, but he knew that was a lost hope. "What's up, Jim?" said the doctor, elbowing the Vulcan out of the way impatiently. Kirk looked up at him, unable to speak: he just moved aside. McCoy looked down, and saw the face of a pale, dead child staring fixedly up at him from an already congealing patch of crimson blood.

Joanna's face. Joanna's blood...

McCoy turned as white as a sheet and fainted dead away.

Before he could hit the ground, Spock stepped forward and caught the crumpling body in his arms.

* * * * *

CHAPTER SIX

Kirk came out of his horrified trance almost at once, though to him it seemed like a lifetime. Feeling he was living some sort of nightmare, he pulled out his communicator and raised the ship.

"Enterprise, this is Kirk. Come in, Enterprise."

"Scott here, Captain."

"Scotty: we have six to beam up urgently; two unconscious, one of whom may be dying. I want M'Benga and Chapel with orderlies and stretchers to report to the Transporter Room now. Alert Mr. Kyle."

"Aye, aye, Captain." A few seconds elapsed.

"Kyle here, sir. Ready to beam up six on your order."

The medical staff of the Enterprise was too professional to show unseemly emotion when confronted with the sick and injured, but Chapel could not hide her concern when she saw Spock's tall figure materialise on the transporter pad, with the limp form of Leonard McCoy clasped protectively to his chest. Anticipating her questions he stepped down at once and deposited the doctor neatly on a stretcher.

"Doctor McCoy is in no danger, Nurse; he is merely in a faint, due to shock. I will see him to Sickbay. Doctor M'Benga: Mo-hal has been stabbed and needs your immediate attention. Tarno will give you the details you require."

Kirk contacted the ship again. "Mr. Scott? Tell Mr. Spock he has the con, and then have yourself beamed down - alone. I want you to bring a corpse bag with you - unobtrusively, you understand?"

He heard nothing for a moment. Then Scott said, in a carefully expressionless voice, "Aye, Captain. Understood. Scott out."

Kirk turned to where Chekov stood, still sobbing, with his face buried in Uhura's shoulder. She had her arms round him and was murmuring low soothing phrases as if to a small child, while Sulu stood by looking rather helpless, patting him on the back as comfortingly as he could.

"Mr. Sulu," he said quietly, "take Chekov with you down to the shore and bring up everything the landing party has left down there - and that includes all unused stores from the pirate vessel. Perrier here will help you," he added, glancing at the one remaining crewman who had not been beamed up. "Make sure that you efface every sign of our having been there before you come up for the last time. Forget about the raft; the sea water will soon rot the lashing, and then the logs will drift wherever the currents choose to take them. You will find me here when you have finished."

"Yes, Captain," said Sulu. He took Chekov firmly by the arm. "Come along now, Pavel, there's a good chap: we're going to need your help, you know, aren't we?" and he proceeded to march his friend smartly away downhill.

"You go with them too, Uhura," said Kirk. "Keep them up to the mark for me!" She smiled rather sadly, and set off after them, with a wistful backward glance to where Marinta's body still lay as it had fallen.

A stocky figure with a bulky, nondescript parcel under its arm sparkled into existence in front of Kirk. "Scott reporting, Captain - as you requested." He put the bundle down at Kirk's feet. "What's happened, sir? Has there been - " Then, as Kirk moved to undo the wrappings he caught sight of Marinta's huddled form.

"Ministers of grace defend us! It's the bonnie lassie!"

He dropped on his knees beside the corpse and gently touched the colourless cheek.

"The puir wee girl!... the puir pretty wee lamb!... Who did this to her, Captain?" he demanded, turning a distressed and angry gaze on Kirk. "What's been going on down here? Was it the Orions? Why did ye no' look after her properly as ye promised?" He got to his feet wrathfully. Kirk put up a placating hand.

"She did it herself, Scotty, with a knife. She slaughtered the two prisoners first, and she may have killed Mo-hal." Scott was shocked into silence. An expression of utter incredulity spread across his face. "There will be an enquiry, Mr. Scott, into the circumstances which allowed these murders to take place, and I shall hold it with the least possible delay. Our immediate concern is one of discretion. It would be better for Ensign Chekov if he did not have to see the body again, and essential that Doctor McCoy be spared that ordeal." Scott looked puzzled, but said nothing. "In fact, there is no reason why anyone on the ship should be exposed to more distress; if there is a post-mortem to be performed, Doctor M'Benga will undertake it. Now, if you will give me a hand with this rather unpleasant task, Mr. Scott..."

"What is going to happen to her finally, Captain?" asked Scott, as they carefully lifted Marinta's body and slid it expertly into the bag.

"The cold storage compartment of the Enterprise first, Mr. Scott," replied Kirk rather brutally as he closed the bag's hermetic seal. "I shall be dropping off my report on this affair at Starbase Six before we proceed to Gamma Citari, and the body will be unshipped there. Should there be any distant relatives, or friends who might wish to claim it, they will be able to do so. If not, Starbase Authority will dispose of the problem."

Scott looked at his Captain with unconcealed disapproval.

"Ye talk as if ye didna care one jot nor tittle about the puir child's death, Captain. It's not like ye at all. I dinna ken *what* to think."

"Mr. Scott, that poor child, as you call her, savagely attacked one of the crewmen, who may well be dying even as we speak; she knifed him, Mr. Scott, in the chest, with every intention of killing him. She burned my last two prisoners to death with phaser fire while they were helpless in the stockade. She has besotted one of my officers and sexually enticed one of my crew. If I had not heard her distress call, six of my Security men would still be alive today." He stopped, mainly for want of breath. "We'll discuss it all later, Mr. Scott: I want you and that bag back on the Enterprise before Ensign Chekov and his companions return. Tell Mr. Kyle to observe silence on the matter till further orders. Please take the body yourself on a gurney to Refrigeration, and if you meet anyone on the way don't stop to explain."

"Understood, Captain." Scott's tone was rather subdued. He was still looking thoughtful when the transporter beam whisked him and his anonymous burden out of sight.

Kirk waited at the edge of the trees until Sulu and his three helpers had made their final trip back from the beach; two small piles of impedimenta now stood tidily in the centre of the clearing, ready to be beamed up to the ship. Chekov had regained control of himself, but to Kirk's secret dismay avoided meeting his Captain's gaze. Kirk said nothing to him: that would have to come later. He gave orders to torch the stockade, and they stood in silence watching it burn. When the last pole had crumbled away to nothing, and they had carefully stamped out the glowing embers and dispersed the ash, Kirk said simply, "Are you ready, gentlemen, Lieutenant?" No one demurred. He opened a channel to the Enterprise, and a minute later they had shaken the dust of the Garden of Eden off their feet for good.

McCoy became aware gradually of his own existence once more, in much the same way as one does, waking in the morning after a healthful night's sleep. He lay comfortably with closed eyes, putting off the moment, as one does, when he would have to get up and face the responsibilities of the day's work. Then it occurred to him that work was not a problem just now - for was he not temporarily on vacation, in a beautiful place near the sea?... Amazing how soft the sand was beneath him, and the sun was so warm and bright. He had lain down to sleep in the shade of a rock, but his hand must be lying in a patch of sunlight, it felt so hot... He moved it experimentally, and realised that someone was holding it. Even as the thought stirred his consciousness, he felt his hand released; there was a slight movement at his side...

Strange! it sounded like boots scraping, or a chairleg maybe, on a hard floor... Dammit - where the hell was he? What on earth had happened to him? He frowned horribly as he tried to get his scattered thoughts to make some kind of sense. Forcing open his reluctant eyelids at last, he saw that he was in bed, in a white room lined with glass-fronted cabinets and without windows... Sickbay? How the devil did he get here?

He looked round in his confusion for Christine Chapel, but she was nowhere to be seen. Propping himself up, with a muttered curse, on one elbow, he suddenly became aware that a tall figure was standing at the head of his bed; he looked up, and encountered a black stare, levelled at him from under slanting, satanic brows, one of which rose slightly as if in response to something he might have said. A pointed ear was outlined against gleaming black hair. *Not the devil exactly*, he thought, bemused, *but a damned good imitation! Only - did the devil ever look at you with so much naked concern in his eyes?* McCoy shook his head slightly, as if to clear his brain of the mists that still befuddled it. A calming hand was laid on his shoulders.

"Doctor." The voice was very familiar. He struggled to respond.

"Bones!" The hand gave him a gentle shake. "There is nothing to worry about now. You are in good hands. You are safely back on board the Enterprise. You have been unconscious for a little while, that is all." McCoy blinked at him, stupidly. Spock let go of his shoulder and sat down on the bed. His tone became urgent. "Listen to me, Leonard. Your daughter is quite all right. The ship received a message fifteen hours ago from the medical base on Marcos Two. Joanna's assignment there has been completed, and she will be at Starbase Six, en route for her next mission, when we make our call there. She asked the Deputy Communications officer to tell you that she is looking forward unreservedly to an early meeting with her father." Spock rose to his feet, and walked towards the door. "Nurse!" he called. Chapel appeared. "I think the doctor may feel like getting up now." She smiled up at him without troubling to conceal her delight and relief at the news. To her surprise, he favoured her with a significant gleam in return, before departing.

Kirk sat in his office, glumly fingering a sheet of jotted notes that lay on the desk in front of him. Tarno stood rigidly to attention on the other side of the desk, his eyes fixed on the regulation spot on the wall above his commanding officer's head, and wished fervently for the umpteenth time that he had never been born, never joined Starfleet, above all never been fool enough to get himself a job in Security, let alone a Master-Sergeant's stripes. Where had it all led him? To this moment when he was forced to look at himself in the mirror of events and recognise that he simply wasn't good enough any more to hold the job down. He just wished Captain Kirk would fire him and get it over with instead of going off into a fit of the blues and keeping him, Tarno, on tenterhooks with worry. He tried to read his fate in Kirk's face, which looked grim enough, but apart from that gave very little away.

"Well, Tarno." Kirk said at last, straightening himself in his chair. "There's this in your favour, that you've been absolutely honest with me about your failure to act quickly enough in this affair. You'll be relieved to know that thanks to Doctor M'Benga's remarkable skill and promptness, Mo-hal is out of danger - though

whether he will ever be fit enough for active duty again is at present in the lap of the gods. The knife blade missed his heart by only a centimetre, and there is considerable damage to the lung. I shall be commending him for his courage in trying to disarm the girl when I write my report for Starfleet: you may tell him that yourself when you go to visit him in Sickbay this evening."

"Sir!" Tarno swallowed hard. "Thank you, sir. He'll be a very proud lad, sir."

"I have also taken into consideration your own bravery shown during the fighting which followed the Orions' attack on the landing party. There is however no way I can avoid recommending that you be downgraded from Master-Sergeant, with the loss of one stripe and corresponding drop in pay. It is open to you to regain the position you have forfeited on the promotional ladder after eighteen standard months, always providing you commit no more errors of judgement during that period. And it is always on the cards that an outstanding positive contribution on your part might shorten your wait considerably."

"Yes, sir. Thank you very much, sir."

"One more thing. I quite understand that you will wish Sarka's name cleared of any posthumous suspicion of dereliction of duty regarding the loss of a communicator, but I would prefer that the facts remain known only to those of you who were there and who have survived. It does no good, and it becomes no one, to speak ill of a dead comrade. That is an order. Please see that it is obeyed."

"Yes, sir. I understand."

"As long as you do, Tarno. That is all, Dismissed."

Left alone, Kirk slumped forward and rested his head in his hands. The hardest task was yet to do, and he flinched from it in advance, but it was unavoidable. Chekov's career was far from being a matter of no concern to him; on the contrary, he had taken considerable pains to foster the young officer's talents. Spock had found him a most diligent and conscientious student, and Kirk had hoped that it would not be too long before his initiative and leadership capabilities began to blossom to match. Now he was asking himself whether he might have been mistaken - whether there was not some lurking weakness, some hidden flaw of character, about to prove that his opinion and his judgement had been wrong.

To put it plainly, if Chekov had been guilty of gross carelessness or, perish the thought, of some degree however slight, of complicity where Marinta's behaviour was concerned, the disappointment Kirk would feel would be severe and painful. He thought to himself that he would almost rather not know the truth - but that notion sent his feelings swinging wildly in the opposite direction. Truth was truth: it was the rock on which you stood, however hard it might be to your vulnerable feet. In a fit of impatience with himself he got up and paced up and down the small room, unable to bring himself to face interrogating Chekov right away, as he knew he should.

At last the obvious struck him: a Captain was entitled to ask for his senior officers' advice. Spock was on the Bridge and therefore temporarily unavailable - and perhaps some of the issues involved might prove embarrassing to talk about with Spock; but there was Bones, who could certainly be counted upon to have an opinion,

and whose insights into human passions and weaknesses, born of his own past experience, had been of considerable help to Kirk on earlier occasions. Yes, he would go and talk to Bones about it, over a glass of something stimulating... Quite probably they would disagree violently - *and that would be just as useful in its own way*, he reflected with a reminiscent smile. Feeling better already, he got up, locked away his files, and strode off at once in the direction of Sickbay.

McCoy had just finished going the rounds of his patients and was considering the attractions of a cup of coffee when Kirk barged in.

"Glad to see you up and working, Bones," he said cheerfully. "If you really feel as good as you look I shall be very relieved. Was rather worried about you for a moment back there. Spock too, I suspect - I think he saw a long, dark future stretching ahead of him without his favourite sparring partner. But your powers of recuperation seem to be positively Vulcan." *A little ribbing wouldn't hurt*, he thought to himself: *get the adrenalin flowing, and before you knew it -* But his expectations were disappointed. McCoy looked at him fixedly for a moment or two, and then abruptly changed the subject.

"What are you after, Jim? I don't imagine you came in here at this hour of the day just to exchange problems with your family G.P."

"No, Bones, I admit it. I've got a problem."

"Is it the doctor you want, or the psychiatrist?"

"Don't be flippant: I'm serious. The fact is, I've got Chekov on my mind."

"Oh. I see. What did he have to say for himself?"

"I haven't talked to him yet. Do you know, I think I'm almost afraid to."

"Do you mean to tell me that that poor boy is being kept in an agony of suspense because the Captain is too much of a coward to shake the truth out of him? He's the one who ought to be trembling in his shoes, not you. When will you learn to consider other people for heaven's sake!"

"Ah. I knew I should come and talk to you. A dose of foul-tasting medicine is exactly what my conscience was hankering for. Don't you have anything to take the taste away afterwards? a little old-fashioned Saurian hospitality, by any chance?"

McCoy grinned, and went to the locked cupboard which held his secret store of choice and priceless bottles. "You'd better step into my parlour, Jim," he said, accentuating his drawl. "Have a comfortable chair, and take the weight off your mind."

Kirk sat down, and picking up his glass, swallowed a mouthful of the innocent-looking blue liquid that the doctor had just poured into it. It took only a second or two for its far from innocent punch to hit him just where he needed it most. He exhaled deeply, and held what was left of his drink up to the light with a contemplative stare, as if fascinated by its deep sapphire hue.

"Well, Bones," he said finally. "We know where she got the phaser... What bothers me is where she got the knife."

"It was an Orion knife, Jim. You can't think Chekov would be crazy enough to give her such a thing, or let her fool around with it? She must have picked it up in the forest when no one had the time to keep an eye on her. I certainly had other things to keep me busy once the fighting started - treating injured crewmen, protecting the medical supplies, if you can call them that. There were several fights in the forest, weren't there? Uhura accounted for one pirate, so I'm told. Marinta could have come across a knife lying in the undergrowth almost anywhere."

"Or gone looking for one on purpose," rejoined Kirk grimly. "But how could she have had a knife on her without Chekov noticing, in that flimsy dress? He can't have been that blind: he should have taken it away from here there and then."

"I don't know, Jim. He's the one you'll have to ask."

"The other inexplicable thing is why he didn't stick with her. Where was he, and what can he have been doing, while she was creating all that mayhem by the stockade? Do you suppose they had a tiff and walked off in opposite directions?"

"Jim, I know I have many unrecognised and unrewarded talents, but the second sight is quite definitely not one of them. You've had your medicine: now go and do the exercises, will you? Put the lad and yourself out of your collective misery."

"Yes, Doctor!" Kirk got up and rather to McCoy's surprise walked over resolutely to the intercom set on the wall. "Captain to Bridge."

"Bridge here, Captain." It was Spock's voice.

"Mr. Spock: is Ensign Chekov up there with you?"

"Negative, Captain. Lieutenant Masterman has his station. The Ensign does not come on duty for another two point four seven standard hours."

"Have you any idea where he might be?"

"One moment, Captain." A whispered conference took place in the background.

"Lieutenant Uhura reports he went to his quarters, sir. Do you wish me to contact him?"

"Not over the ship's intercom, Mr. Spock. I'll find a messenger. Kirk out."

He stuck his head into the corridor and stopped the first crewman who came by. Actually by good fortune it was a crewwoman - his own personal yeoman, Janice Rand.

"Janice: please go to Ensign Chekov's quarters and ask him to come to my cabin in five minutes' time. I'll be there directly. If you draw a blank, just look for him yourself, discreetly, till you find him. Don't involve anyone else."

"Very good sir." She scurried away.

Chekov jumped like a startled rabbit when he heard the tap on his door. The summons he had been dreading had come at last! Somehow he got to the door and opened it. Yes! There stood Yeoman Rand, the Captain's own personal dogsbody. He gathered his courage together, gave one last despairing glance round the painfully tidy room and followed her like a man going to execution.

As he waited for Chekov to present himself, Kirk could not help going back in memory to a younger James Kirk, the one who had been the same age that Chekov was now. That bright spark had had quite a number of feminine scalps dangling from his belt by that time, he seemed to recall... Whereas the rather staid young officer he was about to interview was not the kind you readily tended to associate with girls, parties, flirtations, painting the town red... Kirk could not remember even having seen him slightly tiddley, except through bravado, when Scotty's boastful assertions about the superiority of whisky to vodka got just too much for his sensitive Russian soul to bear. It was very possible that he believed himself to be really in love when he had fallen under the spell of that ill-starred nymphet with the extraordinary colour-shifting eyes... That was the root of the whole problem, Kirk was convinced...

But who was he to condemn poor Chekov for succumbing to one of the strongest urges known to man? The procession of pretty faces and figures - shore-leave romances, week-end encounters, one-night stands - that had decorated his Academy years and later his furloughs (their charms rather blurred now in his mind, truth to tell by the passage of time) gave way in his reflections to more deeply-etched memories, associated with pain and grief: Edith, Rayna, Miramanee who had been, so briefly, his wife and who would have borne their child - a child, alas, that had never had a chance to see the light of day.

He found himself thinking that Chekov might very well be enduring at this moment a similar ordeal, a comparable heartbreak. You could not be a Starfleet officer, and accomplish the number of missions Chekov had, without seeing death: but the death of a pretty young girl - a girl you thought you loved - mercifully, that did not happen every day... if you were Spock, for instance, it was unlikely to happen to you at all...

Spock; Kirk remembered then what he owed to Spock, who had helped him to sleep, helped him to forget, blunted the edge of his pain just by being there... Chekov had plenty of good friends, too, but they were only human... In the final analysis, of course, Kirk knew very well what it was that had saved him from ever committing the ultimate folly over a woman: Chekov also had ambition, but he would never be Captain of the Enterprise. Some day perhaps... Kirk was trying to visualise Chekov commanding a ship of his own when the door buzzer brought him back with a jump to real life.

"Come in," he called, straightening the papers on his desk.

"Ensign Chekov reporting as ordered, Captain." The voice was tight: the words came out in a rush. Kirk looked up. Chekov was standing rigidly at attention but his fingers were twitching with strain as he tried to hold them in the correct position at his sides.

"Thank you for coming so promptly, Ensign. Sit down."

Chekov obeyed.

"Now, as you know, I have to make my report to Starfleet about recent events, and I need your help. There are some aspects of the affair about which I am not yet thoroughly informed, and which only your evidence can clear up. I need not tell you how important it is that you should give me truthful answers to my questions, without holding anything back."

Chekov gulped. "Yes, sir. I'll do my best."

"Right. Now I understand from what Lieutenant Uhura told me before we left Talasson that you and Marinta went for a walk on your own, leaving the others on the beach. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir. Marinta wanted to explore a bit. She said staying on the beach all the time bored her."

"And so you offered to escort her?"

"No - well, actually, she asked me, Captain. It was me she wanted to go with her."

"I see. And I take it you did not object?"

Something in Kirk's light tone made Chekov look up. Was that a twinkle in the Captain's eye? It couldn't be...

"No, sir, I didn't... as a matter of fact, I'd been wanting a chance like that even since we got to Talasson... to have her to myself - Just to talk to, you know... about all sorts of things that wouldn't have interested the others - private things, sir."

"I do understand, Pavel." The use of his first name surprised Chekov considerably, but it made him feel a little less tense. "She was an attractive girl, wasn't she? You thought a lot of her."

"She was wonderful, Captain - at least I thought so then... I'd never met anyone like her before. She was so lovely, and such fun as well." He kept his voice from breaking, with an effort. "She could sing like a bird, sir, and act - "

"Now, where did you two go, on your walk?"

"Up through the woods, sir, to one of those beautiful meadows above the trees. We were very hot with the climb so we sat down for a rest on the grass, in the shade at the edge of the wood. Marinta had Lieutenant Uhura's old combat jacket so she sat on that because the grass was still a bit wet."

"And then what happened?"

Chekov hesitated with embarrassment. "I put my arms round her, sir, and she let me kiss her."

"And is that all you did?"

"Sir?..." Chekov went bright red as he caught the Captain's drift. "Of course it was, Captain! Surely you don't think - "

"All right, Pavel, all right. I beg your pardon. Now what I don't understand is how you came to be apart later. Why did you separate? Weren't you supposed to be looking after her?"

"It wasn't my doing, Captain. I don't really know what happened, honestly... We were lying on the grass looking up at the sky, me with my head in her lap... I know it sounds awfully silly, sir - "

"Ensign, you have my word that no private details you choose to disclose will ever pass the four walls of this room. Please continue."

"She started to sing to me, sir... a Xorian lullaby, she said it was... it was just all a joke, really..." He was blushing beetroot red by now. "She was stroking my hair and pretending she was my mother, rocking me to sleep... Oh, God, it sounds so awful, now - stone cold like this - sir, I'll never be able to look you in the face again..."

Kirk got up abruptly and turning his back on Chekov began to pace the room, torn between pity and a mad desire to laugh till he cried. For a few moments he simply dared not let Chekov see his face. When he had got control of his features again he sat down and said,

"You are telling me that you went to sleep, Ensign?"

"Yes, sir. When I woke up, there was nobody there. I looked round but I couldn't see her anywhere. Then I heard an awful noise going on somewhere down the hill. I got up and grabbed the jacket and rushed down into the woods to see what was happening - I thought she might be in some sort of trouble. I didn't really have time to work it out very clearly in my mind, sir, my one idea was to get down there and..." His voice did break this time, but he went on bravely. "And then I saw everybody standing about in the clearing, and there she was lying on the ground, and all that blood... I couldn't believe it: I thought I was having a nightmare. And then, when they told me what she'd done... well, I wanted to kill them, sir, for saying such dreadful things about her... I still feel as if I can't believe it, but everyone else seems to... How could anyone like that have done anything so awful, Captain? I just can't - "

"Exactly, Ensign," said Kirk, interrupting the flow. "That is what I want to know as well - how could she? Where did she get that knife? Did you give it to her?"

The brutality of the question took Chekov's breath away. "Knife, Captain?" he stammered, clearly bewildered.

"The knife she stabbed Mo-hal with. The knife she used to slit her own throat. Pavel - what do you know about that knife?"

"Nothing, sir. Only what Hikaru - what Lieutenant Sulu told me - that it belonged to one of the pirates - an Orion knife. He wants it for his collection." He shuddered, and looked at Kirk with transparently honest eyes.

"You agree that she must have had it with her when you two set off for your walk?"

Chekov looked at him, puzzled. "I don't see how she could have, sir - I never saw any sign of it. Didn't she take it from one of the pirates in the clearing?"

"Hardly, Ensign: think! They were disarmed on capture, before they were put in the stockade. It is true that she got Mo-hal's

phaser from him by deceit, but how could she have taken anything from pirates who were out of reach behind bars? even if there had been time? No: she must have had it when she enticed you away from the others because that was, quite clearly, part of her plan. Now where can she have been concealing it? It was a hot day, as you said: she wasn't wearing any more than the rest of you. How *is* it that you didn't see it, Pavel, that your suspicions weren't aroused by anything?" Kirk's tone was insistent, almost pleading. Chekov continued to stare at him blankly. He tried to think back, to the moments on the beach... then suddenly he remembered something Uhura had said.

"The jacket, Captain - Lieutenant Uhura tried to persuade her to leave it behind - but Marinta said she would feel chilly in the shade of the trees... Do you think?..." He broke off, and looked at Kirk with a kind of horror dawning in his eyes.

"What kind of jacket was it, Ensign? Did it have pockets?"

"Why, of course, sir. It was an old combat jacket. Uhura had lent it to her to go on the expedition. They have pockets inside."

"So they do, Pavel. Large, roomy pockets. Intended for stashing electronics gear, mineral samples, iron rations, tools of various kinds... Quite big enough to accommodate a knife."

"Oh, my God - then it must be true, Captain... it was all planned from the beginning... and I thought..." There was a long pause. "Captain - how could I have known?"

"Set your mind at rest, Ensign. You couldn't have known. Believe me, where women are concerned it is often impossible to know. When you have met a few more, my young friend, you will have learnt the importance of remembering that. They may look innocent and fragile, but they can be as determined as men, as devious as men, and as ruthless as men when circumstances demand it. You are not the first to have made such a mistake. I can assure you that we've all been there, and you won't be the last."

Chekov still looked at him anxiously. "What are you going to do with me, sir?"

Kirk did laugh outright at that. "Do to you, Pavel? What do you think I'm going to do to you? String you up by your thumbs to teach you never to look at another pretty girl, or what?"

Chekov blinked. He found it hard to believe that the Captain really was going to let his foolish credulity, and what he thought of as his grave dereliction of duty, go unpunished.

"Demote me, sir - transfer me off the ship..."

"Good heavens, Ensign, Starfleet has too much invested in you for me to throw away a promising young officer just because he's made one mistake. Dammit, I've got too much invested in you, and so has my First Officer: we're not going to let you go that easily. Mistakes are made to be learnt from, and I want to see you learn from this one. Now I can't do that if I've sent you off to be fourth mate on some old transport hulk, can I?" He looked at the gloomy young face opposite him, hoping to see at least the glimmer of a smile.

But the release of tension was too much for Chekov. He burst into tears.

That was altogether too much for Kirk. He got up and poured himself a drink. After a slight hesitation he poured Chekov one too, and plonked it down in front of him, at the same time shoving a perfectly enormous clean white handkerchief into the young man's hand. Chekov grabbed it thankfully. When he realised how big it was, the tears changed to hysterical laughter. If Kirk had needed anyone to die for him at that precise instant, Chekov would have been his man. He got over his outburst at last, wiped his eyes, picked up the glass the Captain had so thoughtfully put in front of him and rashly downed its contents in a single go. When he had gasped his way back to being able to speak again coherently, he said,

"Captain, I promise you that I'll do my best to justify your faith in me, and Mr. Spock's too. I'll try not to be so easily made a fool of in future, I really will." He hesitated a moment. "You know, sir, I still can't understand - Marinta, I mean... it's almost as if she was two different people... How can such a thing be?"

"You're quite right, Ensign: she was two different people, but she probably didn't know it herself. The awful shock of seeing her parents die must have been too much for her sanity. Schizoid tendencies can remain latent for years, until something happens to trigger them off. Just another thing that none of us could possibly have known beforehand: always remember that, too. Now cheer up and go and have your lunch."

"Yes, Captain. Thank you for talking to me. I feel better now. Thank you for everything." He saluted, and left Kirk's cabin as if he were walking on air.

Kirk called a debriefing session for all his officers who had been on Talasson, within forty-eight hours of their return to the Enterprise. He outlined succinctly the course of events as he understood it, accepting new contributions of fact and corrections of detail, confronting one person's impressions and experiences with another's, until a clear picture had emerged and been agreed by all. Then, in very serious tone, he proceeded to sum up.

"I am sure, gentlemen, Lieutenant, that we all look back on the recent mission with mixed feelings. On the credit side, we have ensured that a dangerous and barbaric group of criminals will never rob a space vessel again, or torture and kill innocent travellers. We have also restored a beautiful young planet to a condition in which natural processes will soon efface the destruction and other damage consequent upon those criminals' temporary occupation.

"In order to ensure that Nature's healing work can begin immediately, I have decided not to grant shore leave to the rest of the crew. The lack of the kind of entertainment facilities many of them look forward to, coupled with the impenetrability of most of the land-mass, renders Talasson unsuitable as a rest and recreation planet, and the concentration of large numbers of people on and around the beaming-down sites would do unacceptable damage to an environment which has already suffered enough interference. The Prime Directive is here applicable, gentlemen, and I intend to use it to protect a whole living entity at a fragile and unique stage in its evolution."

He paused and looked round the table. There were no signs of dissent.

"For our successes, however, a heavy price has been paid. None of you need blame yourselves for the death of the girl we thought we had rescued: that tragedy must ultimately be laid at the door of her parents' murderers. But we have also lost six of our comrades in a fight whose outcome should never for one moment have been in doubt. Through an act of carelessness on the part of one of them we lost the advantage of surprise. Instead of sustaining a few minor injuries, we found ourselves the victims of surprise, forced to fight desperately for our own survival, with consequent heavy loss of life on both sides.

"I now find myself faced with the heavy task of informing six families of the disappearance of a father, a husband, or a son, and but for the skill and devotion of my medical staff it would almost certainly have been seven. And finally, there can now be no arraignment of the Orion pirates before the bar of justice of a Federation court, since none are left alive to answer the charges that we, and who knows how many others, might have brought against them. This is not an outcome that Starfleet, or myself, will see as an acceptable model for the future.

"It is a terrifying lesson for all of us on the incalculable consequences of a tiny error or an apparently insignificant oversight. We all, myself included, under the influence of the atmosphere of a paradisaical world, allowed ourselves to develop expectations which events were to prove unjustifiable. In short, we lost our sharp edge: we forgot to expect the unexpected.

"In my official report blame will be associated with only two names: that of a member of Security, now dead, and that of the Captain of this ship, who did not give the advice of two of his senior officers the serious attention it merited. Enterprise will shortly be warping out of orbit to proceed to her next mission, which as you know is a scientific one: to prospect for dilithium on Gamma Citari. I am sure that when we get there you will all be thoroughly prepared for each and every eventuality, plus one! Thank you, Lieutenant, gentlemen: in my opinion you are still the best crew a Starship could ever have. Debriefing is now over."

When the others had gone, Kirk looked up at the two who still lingered near the briefing-room door.

"Spock, McCoy - I owe both of you an apology for not attaching proper weight to the warnings you each gave me at different times about that girl's mental state. I should never have let her to Talasson, I see that, now it's too late. Believe me, Bones, the things I'm saying to myself are far worse than any your caustic tongue could find to utter."

"Well, Jim, it goes against the grain to kick a man when he's down, so let's forget it for now - always remembering that I'll certainly remind you of your obtuseness next time it strikes me as necessary!"

"You do that, Bones; after all, it *is* your unique privilege. I'm counting on you, mind: don't ever not exercise it."

"Captain," said Spock rather formally, "I assume that your interview with Ensign Chekov had a satisfactory outcome?"

"Yes, Mr. Spock. I am very pleased to be able to confirm that it did. Of course, as soon as he mentioned that Marinta had insisted on taking Uhura's jacket with her, I realised where the knife had

been concealed. But I had to find out whether Chekov knew, so I held my tongue until he had worked it out for himself. I am now quite convinced of his innocence in that respect - I only wonder whether, considering the time it took him to get to the obvious conclusion, he is ever going to learn to think fast enough to make a reliable officer one day."

"You've got to allow for the fact that his brain was still addled with romantic fancies, Jim," said McCoy. "Being in love does terrible things to the mind."

Kirk could have sworn at that moment that he saw the Vulcan's ears prick up like a fox's: with a gleam of triumph lighting up his dark eyes, Spock turned to McCoy and said, in a tone of the most infuriating smugness:

"I congratulate you, Doctor, on your flash of almost Vulcan insight. I could not have put it better myself."

He stalked out without allowing McCoy the remotest chance of a comeback. When Kirk had recovered from his laughter he said,

"Come along, Bones: I think what we both need is a drink. You have to regroup your forces after that knock-out blow, and I have to sit down after lunch and rough out my damned report."

* * * * *

EPILOGUE

Several days had passed. Talasson was now no more than an invisible speck left behind in the vast blackness of space, and for the members of the recent landing party life had to all intents and purposes resumed its normal patterns of routine duties followed by routine relaxations. It was now that McCoy finally gave way to the temptation which had been biting at him on and off ever since the Enterprise had left orbit and set her course for Starbase Six. There was something he had to get off his chest if only for the sake of his own peace of mind.

Dinner was over and his evening rounds were done, the few patients left in Sickbay either peacefully reading or asleep. It seemed as good a time as any. The doctor therefore betook himself quietly and purposefully up to the command corridor where the Captain and his First Officer had their quarters. It was not Kirk's door he knocked at.

The familiar red twilight seemed rather welcoming, as he sank into a chair and looked across at the Vulcan, sitting straight-backed and imperturbable behind a pile of tapes on his desk. Tall shadows stretched up the walls and touched the ceiling, filling the corners of the room with mysterious darkness, out of which came the gleam of an ivory chessman or a polished stone figurine, as the little dancing flame sent its soul flickering over them and woke them to momentary life. The doctor, vulnerable as always to atmosphere, felt his mood change, almost against his will. The positive silence with which the room was charged seemed to oppose itself to speech like a physical barrier. He found himself even beginning to question the validity of speech - yet without it, how could you communicate?... Spock, damn him, seemed in no hurry to break the silence.

"I came because I wanted to talk to you, Spock... but now I'm now quite sure... whether talking's the answer to anything, I

mean - "

The room seemed to scream in protest at the illogic of that statement. Its tenant did not move a muscle: his gaze was totally inscrutable. *Oh, what the hell* - thought McCoy, and plunged on.

"All of a sudden I'm wondering - talking about some things seems like knocking the bloom off the petals of a flower... What you wanted to talk about isn't itself any more, just because - it's as though just naming things could start the processes that destroy them... Back there on Talasson I was watching a butterfly: it came so close that I could see the coloured dust on the surface of its wings. I wanted to touch it, but I didn't dare - " He broke off and glanced at Spock helplessly. "I suppose you think I'm talking superstitious nonsense..."

"It is well-known, Doctor, that by the very act of observing... an electron, for example... we change the phenomenon we are seeking to observe."

"Didn't you *feel* anything when you were on Talasson, Spock?" burst out McCoy. "Did that second Paradise leave you cold? Have you come back exactly the same person you were before, not changed in the slightest?"

Seeing his host wince almost imperceptibly, McCoy felt a pang of unaccustomed remorse. "I'm sorry, Spock: first I invade your room, and then your personal privacy... I don't know why it is, but I can't get that planet out of my mind. I suppose I had some mad hope that you might be able to understand, to explain..."

"It was a very beautiful world, Doctor; a kind of unspoiled Earth. Not at all like Vulcan."

McCoy was brought up short by that simple reply. Why had it never occurred to him that a Vulcan might be homesick for his natural environment? He was so used to thinking of Spock's native planet as the one that had driven him away by its intolerance of his mixed heritage, that he had never thought the Vulcan might have more than one cause for regret. Not for the first time, he cursed his own insensitivity.

"No, you're right; it had no deserts, and no desert creatures either," he said, more gently. "No warm colour in the sky, and all that blue ocean... Which reminds me - was your geological excursion as rewarding as you had hoped?"

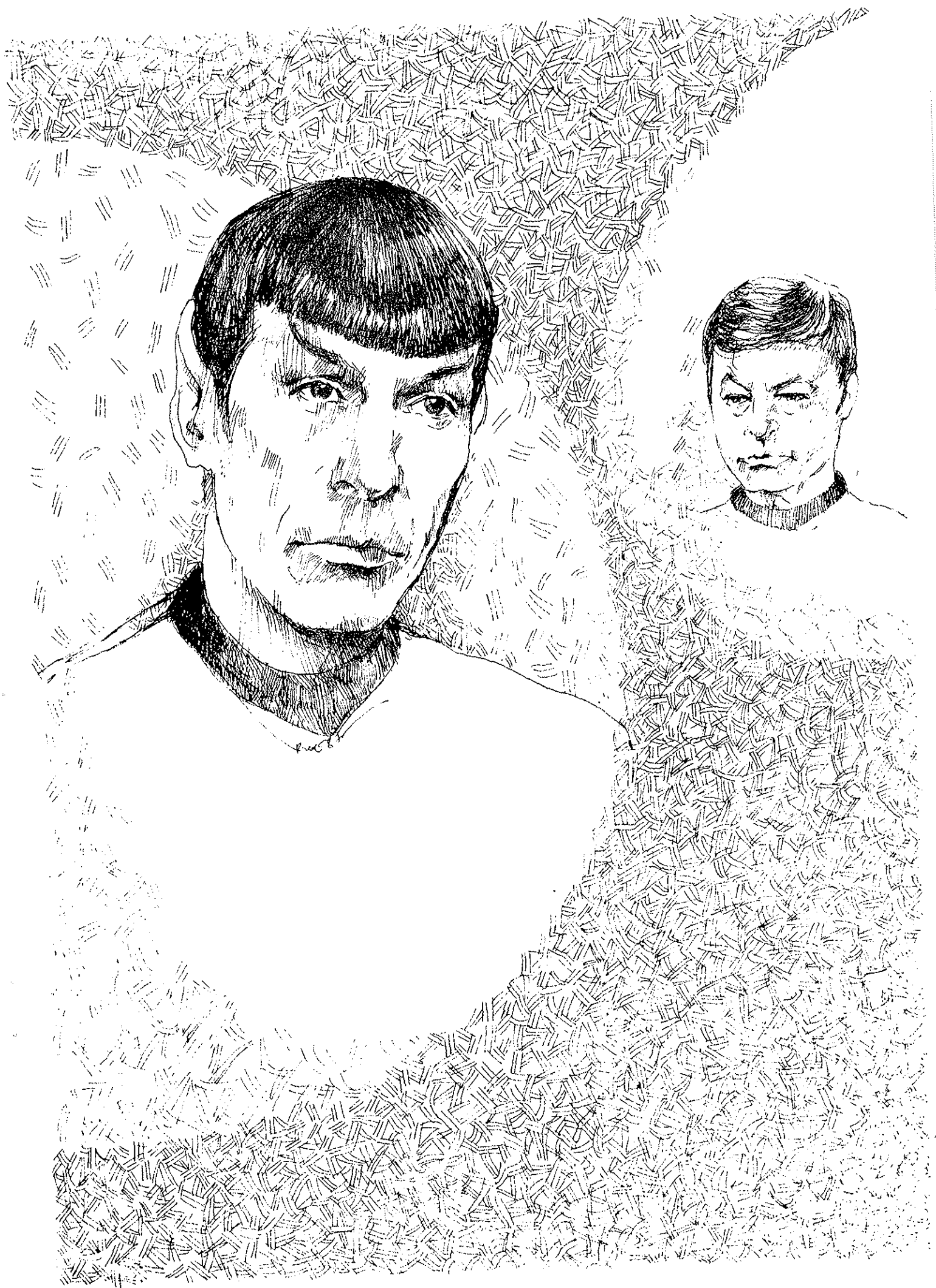
"Yes, Doctor, it was. Very."

McCoy waited. But Spock remained resolutely uncommunicative. *Well, thought McCoy, it's up to me. Here goes!*

"I was right about that cave, Spock, wasn't I? That was dilithium?"

Not a muscle moved. "Cave, Doctor?" The voice was carefully expressionless.

"Yes, Spock, cave. The one I saw you come out of. The one whose entrance I watched you block with a huge boulder. Though how you moved it I'll never know. There are times when I envy you that Vulcan body of yours." He grinned suddenly. "Now there's an admission!" He sat bolt upright and stared at Spock challengingly.



"Nothing to admit in return?"

"You say you saw me?" Still giving nothing away.

"I was up above you at the time. I could see the cave entrance from where I was, on the highest ridge, looking out to sea. You wouldn't have noticed me, with the trees at my back. I infer that you came to the same decision I did."

It was not a question.

"The Prime Directive is an all-embracing concept, Doctor, to be honoured in the observance, not the breach."

It was an answer - of sorts.

"The Prime Directive is of great importance to us all, Spock, not least to our friend next door." He nodded in the direction of Kirk's cabin. "What worries me is, that there are circumstances in which a Starship Captain may be obliged to put other considerations first. I am not unaware of Starfleet's override instructions concerning the presence of certain rare and essential minerals. To be perfectly plain: there are crimes that you and I might commit, Spock, that are not open to him in his position, and which he could not condone. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Is it an assurance you want, or a promise, Doctor? We both have the Captain's best interests at heart. I am sure that in this matter each of us can place perfect reliance on the discretion of the other.

He stood up abruptly and walked over to where McCoy was sitting. To the latter's utter astonishment, he stooped and took the injured hand in both his own.

"Hm! A well-formed scar. I trust you no longer feel pain when you use the fingers?"

McCoy goggled at him, and released his hand with some difficulty from Spock's grip. There was a glint in the Vulcan's eye which he didn't like at all.

"Of course it's all right, thank you. I *am* the doctor, after all! I don't see what my hand has got to do with anything!"

"Nothing to admit, Doctor? You would not have been trying your strength against a cave wall by any chance?"

McCoy fell back in his chair, open-mouthed. "You may not be the Devil, Spock, but I'll swear you must be in league with him! How the hell could you know that?"

"The Human body is so vulnerable; it bleeds profusely from a very slight injury. It was a trail of small red drops, still fresh, that first led me to look inside the cave. I was sufficiently intrigued to take a sample for later analysis in the ship's laboratory. Of course, the fact that it turned out to belong to the same common blood group as your own, Doctor, proved nothing in itself. When I remembered having seen mineral dust in your broken skin, however, I was almost certain."

He looked down at McCoy, the ghost of a smile hovering round his lips. "But to have confirmation from the criminal himself is of

course the most satisfying conclusion to any case."

McCoy opened his mouth indignantly, but was forestalled.

"Crime was your word for it, I believe. But not a decision we have reason to be ashamed of. Please set your mind at rest on that score, Doctor. If I may make a suggestion - " He hesitated, then appeared to make up his mind. "If your partner in crime may presume to prescribe for the physician, the best cure for anxiety is here at hand. Let me try what a little musical - or shall we say emotional? - persuasion will do."

He took down the harp from its place among the gleaming antique blades that constituted the only other decoration on the wall, and began to tune the strings. "Why do you keep those weapons up there, Spock?" asked McCoy idly as he settled more comfortably in his chair. "It doesn't seem like you, somehow, to live and work surrounded by instruments of death."

"It was a custom of old Earth philosophers at one period, I believe, to keep before them a Human skull as a constant memento of their own mortality and an inducement to humility. Those daggers are a reminder to me of the savagery of my Vulcan ancestors and of the passions which nearly destroyed them. I find them the best incentive to self-control and to the substitution of logic for passion as a means of solving life's problems."

He struck a chord very softly, and McCoy gave himself up unreservedly to the pleasure of listening to a master. Who was also his friend.

Hours later, when McCoy had gone, Spock tapped on Kirk's door. The Captain had just come off a turn of duty on the Bridge. "Not asleep yet, Spock?" he said with a huge yawn which he made no effort to hide.

"No, Jim. I have a small problem. The computer has proved to be of no help at all, I thought maybe you - "

"Of course, Spock, if I can - though if the computer can't help you it must be something pretty esoteric. What do you want to know?"

There was a very slight pause. Kirk, sensing that something was wrong, looked up at his friend apprehensively. Spock shifted his weight from one foot to the other in what appeared to be an agony of indecision. Then at last he spoke.

"Jim - who was the Birdman of Alcatraz?"

